



Bernice Summerfield

Filthy Lucre

James Parsons and
Andrew Stirling-Brown

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Bernice Summerfield created by Paul Cornell and is used under licence.

Irving Braxiatel created by Justin Richards.

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For Kate Parsons and Jo Stirling-Brown

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CHAPTER ONE

PAY DAY

‘Do that again and I’ll hit you!’

Trying, albeit not very hard, to stifle his laughter Jardin pretended to blow on burnt fingers after Sylana had firmly removed his hand from her thigh for what had to be the third or possibly even the fourth time.

Why, she thought, did these pilot and co-pilot chairs have to be quite so close together?

Sighing, she gestured towards the control cabin window.

‘Just keep your eyes on all that nothing out there,’ she said, shivering slightly as she always did when she allowed herself a moment to contemplate the mind-shredding emptiness of it all.

He grinned back.

‘And,’ she added, shifting her gaze back to him, ‘keep your hands to yourself.’

It wasn’t that Sylana didn’t love him – her stupid, genius, comedian – but there was a time and a place for everything, and this was neither.

She sat listening to the ship. Her father used to say that ships talked to you. That if you listened carefully you could hear them whispering and singing and if you understood what they were saying then you and the ship could work together.

Which was the point at which she had stopped listening. Her father had spent his life on haulage lines and cheap passenger runs and had had so little ambition it was a wonder to her that he had even attained that much. She had no intention of eking out a life like that, even if he had been happy. She was meant for something better than a creaking old freighter out in the depths of this goddess-forsaken expanse of desolation.

Nonetheless she was pretty sure she could understand what this antiquated hulk was saying, and it was not happy. Not at all.

It was something she might have ignored if the man beside her hadn’t just sneakily increased their speed. He cast a sidelong glance at her, clearly hoping that she hadn’t noticed, then nudged the power control forward again. She glared back.

‘Look,’ she said, deciding to try reasoned argument, ‘I know time’s tight for making the rendezvous, but it isn’t going to help if we blow ourselves to bits getting there is it?’

Silence.

She tried another tack: ‘Jardin, remember this ship is old and was never built for speed.’

He beamed at her. ‘Oh, come on. We should be celebrating. We’re home and dry, babes, home and dry. Just relax. I know what I’m doing.’ He smiled.

‘Well of course you do. You’re a man.’

‘Too right I am. It’s a male brain thing. We just have a natural affinity with mechanics and spatial awareness. It’s innate. You handle the paperwork and the people-stuff and I’ll take care of the

practicalities. Play to our strengths.'

That grin again. She seethed. 'Listen, "babes", you're pushing this thing too far. It probably fell off the maintenance schedules years ago. You push it any harder and sooner or later it's going to fall apart. Sooner by the sounds of it.'

He waved dismissively and started picking at a broken fingernail.

Sylana leaned forward to ease the power back but he lightly slapped her hand away.

'Ah, ah, ah. No touchy.'

She took a long, deep breath. Why did she always let him wind her up? There really wasn't time for another argument. However great the sex would be afterwards.

From somewhere deep in the ship a loud crack echoed through the gantries and girders. She jumped and glanced nervously over her shoulder. Jardin seemed not to have noticed, engrossed as he was in his makeshift manicure. A steady rumble began to impinge on her consciousness. She was sure it hadn't been there a few minutes before but equally she couldn't be sure quite when it had started.

She looked again at Jardin. Either he hadn't noticed or he didn't care. She opened her mouth to speak. He raised a finger to his lips and made a 'shushing' noise. Her hand inched towards the controls again.

'We need to slow down,' she said with exaggerated patience. 'Seriously. Now.'

With a grin so smug she actually felt her jaw dropping open in response he casually reached out and upped the power a further measure.

This was ridiculous. His stupid games were going to blow them and, perhaps just as importantly, their cargo to kingdom come.

Before she could protest further another, louder, crack reverberated through the flight deck. The rumble had become a steady thrumming vibration and items of loose equipment were starting to judder their way towards the edges of control panels and shelves. An empty cup clattered to the floor and rolled away into a corner. Another crack, louder still, and this time she thought she could hear a series of small bangs like distant fireworks.

'Jardin...' she began, and got no further.

An alarm sounded, immediately followed by two others. Their insistent discordance almost but not quite drowning out the sound of what were very definitely explosions coming from behind them. The deck shook violently. More items fell to the floor. The lights flickered then flared.

Galvanised into action, his smug expression bizarrely frozen on his face, Jardin's hands flew over the control desk, trying to pull up all the stat reports he could.

'There's system failures all over the place, but the engines are still good. They're holding together.'

'Slow down then,' she yelled at him over the din, surprised by how calm she was.

Jardin was anything but calm, his confidence finally falling away. 'What do you think I'm doing?' he shouted, adjusting the power control over and over again with increasing urgency, but nothing was happening.

‘Why isn’t it working?’ she demanded.

‘I don’t know.’ He rubbed a hand over his sweating face. ‘Other systems are going down too.’ His puzzlement turned to horror. ‘No. No. No!’

Sylana grabbed his arm. ‘What’s going on? What’s happening?’

There was genuine panic in his voice now. ‘It’s not just the engines, okay?’ He swallowed. ‘I think Vira’s fighting back.’

‘What are you talking...’ Then realisation kicked in. Sylana let go of his arm and sat back in her chair in complete disbelief. ‘Angry’ couldn’t even begin to describe how she felt right now. Her voice was barely audible above the din, ‘You’ve messed it up haven’t you? You’ve totally messed it up.’

Jardin reached for the power control again and as he touched it the panel sparked and crackled, the discharge throwing him backwards and half out of his chair.

‘The fracking controls are live,’ he yelled, blowing on and sucking his fingers for real this time.

‘Find something to insulate you then,’ she replied already casting around for suitable material.

Before he could move the ship was wracked by a series of loud blasts. The deck seemed to buck and rise beneath them. Cracks appeared in some of the pipes running around the walls and steam shot out in scalding gout.

Sylana struggled out of her chair and made for a locker at the back of the room. Another violent lurch sent her sprawling and her head smacked against a bulkhead. She lay there dazed, watching Jardin who sat looking stunned as the ship appeared about to tear itself apart around him.

The lights dimmed and flared again. Then went out.

A final massive bang echoed up from the depths behind them. Smoke billowed around. Further crashes followed, the sound of metal rending against metal as the ship shuddered to a halt. Then all that was left was the dying call of the alarms, fading into silence as she briefly lost consciousness.

*

Inside the freighter’s hold, cargo units partly detached from their housings and crashed into those in front or behind, some buckling on impact. Outside, the lights along the ship dimmed and died. Then a few flickered back on again. A series of explosions tore holes in its side and automatic repair systems went to work to seal them, its primitive AI registering that several of them had failed, before it too failed. The ship sat silent and seemingly almost lifeless, thin trails of gas and vapour leaking out of the unrepaired wounds in the hull.

*

Very slowly, Sylana opened her eyes and registered the emergency lighting. Not for the first time that day was she seeing red.

Painfully, she got to her feet, coughing and choking on the dust and smoke that billowed around her.

Jardin looked over from the command chair, ‘Whoops,’ he said blandly.

‘Whoops!’ she shouted back at him. ‘Whoops?’

She marched over and raised her hand to slap him, her self-control finally abandoning her. He caught it and steadied her.

‘Well what else do you expect me to say?’ he asked. ‘Wasn’t my fault the old crate couldn’t handle it’

‘Oh no, not your fault,’ she seethed, ‘never your fault. Nothing ever is. Always someone or something else which just wasn’t up to it. Why the hell can’t you ever take responsibility for anything?’

‘Okay,’ he said, ‘Okay. I’m sorry. All right. Happy now? Has that made anything any better? No? Well then.’

‘No it doesn’t make anything any better. You’ve stranded us parsecs out from where we are meant to be. I have no idea if what you have done is reparable and even if it is, it could take hours or days to do it, which means we’ll be late, by which time... what the hell are you doing?’

Jardin paused. He was holding a small, rectangular device, his finger hovering over the activator, ‘Recording a distress call.’

‘What? Are you crazy? With what we’ve got...?’

‘Well what else do you suggest?’

She stared at him. Her mouth moved but no words came out.

Taking advantage of the moment, he held up his hand for her to stay like that and started his message.

‘Mayday. Emergency. This is freighter... umm... F-one. We are in distress, I repeat, we are in serious distress. Our current position co-ordinates are 0908. 66140. 59317. Sector Delta 19 Gamma Gamma. Request immediate assistance. I repeat, please assist.’ The recording finished, he pressed transmit.

Sylana couldn’t stay silent any longer. ‘You are unbe-bloody-lievable! First you trash the main drives...’

‘You don’t know that they’re trashed,’ he said.

‘Oh right, sorry, my mistake, all those booms and bangs are probably just its normal running noises.’ Now she raised a hand to stop him interrupting. ‘You trash the drives, then you think it’s a great idea to draw attention to ourselves by sending out a distress call. Brilliant. Utterly brilliant. We’re supposed to be silent running not sending up flares to announce our presence.’

‘Well without some help we’re not going anywhere are we?’ he said and, absently, tapped the control desk. He yelped and snatched his burned fingers back again, but this time the desk was just hot and not live. He grinned then laughed.

Sylana made a strangled gasping sound.

‘Look it’s no big deal,’ he said. ‘Whoever comes doesn’t have to know what we’re carrying or who we are. We’re just a freighter in distress that’s all. Happens all the time. No guarantee anyway that anyone will hear it this far out of the...’

She slapped his face. Hard.

Jardin's draw dropped open in comic astonishment. 'You... you...' he spluttered.

'Yes, me, me,' she said. 'Me has finally had enough of dealing with your 'oh don't worry it'll be fine' attitude.'

She slammed her hand down on the emergency beacon's cancel button and the distress call cut off.

He moved to reinstate it but she caught his arm and thrust her face right up to his.

'Do you know what you're gonna do?' She pointed at the control desk. 'You're gonna fix whatever's wrong with that, get the power back on and the drives going again. Because this time,' she hissed, 'it is not fine. Not by a very very long way. This time we have to sort your mess out for ourselves. You seem to be forgetting that this isn't just another freighter in distress, not just another call for help. This ship doesn't exist.'

A jet of steam hissed out from one of the grills and in the distance there came another ominous rumble.

CHAPTER TWO

PECUNIARY INTEREST

A jet of steam hissed out from one of the grills and in the distance there came another ominous rumble. Ruth stared up at the city's protective shield arcing far above her as another fork of lightning crazed its way across the sky beyond it.

'What a dump,' she said to herself. She couldn't help it. Even though she was a glass half-full kind of woman, this place could still get her down. Legion city was a sprawling metropolis, pretty much like every other one she'd ever seen; from glittering skyscrapers to tin hovels. Bright lights to begging bowels. Some glitz here, some glam there, even a central area of user-friendly, open green space that occasionally got tidied up. But the whole place lacked warmth, beauty, a sense of identity. If it had a marketing slogan it would be 'Legion City – the city of buildings'. It didn't even have a proper name. Eventually she had come to the conclusion that the problem was the people. Legion was a frontier world, home to the scum of the galaxy. The veneer of civilisation could be very thin indeed. Which was why grotty was the word which sprang to mind whenever she thought about the 'god forsaken hell-hole' (Irving's description) of a world she now found herself on. Grotty food, grotty places, grotty atmosphere and grotty weather.

The street she was in now was a prime example: Either side were some once smart, well designed buildings, but their paintwork was now stained pollution-grey and there was a patina of decay that really needed sorting out. One building clearly housed a kitchen, with two large grilled vents alternately ejecting blasts of greasy steam which left blackened oily streaks smeared up the wall above them. The smell wasn't pleasant and it caught at the back of her throat. Ruth let out a long sigh, coughed and hunkered deeper into her coat. Oh well, she supposed, it was as good a home as any.

The sky flickered again and she counted the seconds to the next rumble of thunder. The storm was definitely moving closer. Soon hot, heavy drops would sizzle and fizz on the surface of the energy dome. At a temperature close to boiling point rain didn't just fall on Legion, it fried.

From down a side street she could hear an oddly plaintive wailing noise and momentarily wondered if some landcrows were fighting over a scrap of food. Or mating. Or perhaps both. She peered curiously down the alley, and managed to make out a poncho-clad busker standing in a doorway a few buildings down. The mournful wail was coming from the pipes he was huffing furiously into. He was also, she noted amused at the incongruity, wearing an Advent hat. Which was really nice, she thought. Considering that Legion's winter festival was only a couple of weeks away, she'd hardly seen any celebratory clothing, or decorations, or indeed any sign of it at all for that matter, during her walk. That just summed Legion up perfectly. After a few moment's more listening she recognised the tune: It was the one Benny had described as a traditional Earth folk song called 'The Good, The Bad and The Ugly'. Traditional it might be, but it wasn't exactly seasonal or festive. Ruth didn't really know any of Legion's native tunes, or even if it had any.

The busker noticed her and stopped playing. She waved at him and he lowered back.

'Do you do requests?' she asked as she tossed a coin into the hat, which lay at his feet. He nodded, eyeing her suspiciously. 'My friend Benny told me about this Earth Christmas tune, I wondered if you knew it. Thought it might be a bit more cheerful than...' she broke off as his glower deepened and decided that she might need to pursue a more tactful line.

‘Well anyway. It’s called... Rats. I can’t remember. Oh, erm, something like, “All I want for Christmas is a Da... Da... Da... Something.” Sorry. I’ve forgotten... Oh what was it? Tip of my tongue. I’m rambling a bit aren’t I? Sorry. Oh hold on, yes, I know. Toothbrush.’

Totally bemused, the busker shrugged his shoulders and shook his head.

‘Never mind. Thank you. Oh, love the hat, by the way.’ She hurried on.

A few minutes later the rain started. A steady build from a miserable thin drizzle to a great deluge. As it hit the dome it vapourised and the sky disappeared behind billowing clouds of smoke and steam. It was a spectacle which never failed to fascinate and engross her and consequently she was slightly surprised to find herself standing outside the cheap café which was her destination, the inappropriately named ‘Welcome House, sooner than she had expected. That’s what comes of daydreaming, she thought, as she looked at the uninviting corrugated frontage.

She stood there for a moment, thinking hard about her next move. Her self-appointed mission was to help her best friend in the whole universe get through what she knew would be a particularly difficult day. But what to do? What to say? Should she be up front about it or stay off the subject completely? She pondered her options: Maybe best to avoid the sympathetic shoulder to cry on thing and concentrate on distraction. Maybe she could talk about her new project researching Legion’s ancient history although, on reflection, it wouldn’t make for a very long conversation as she hadn’t had much success so far. Legion being such a secretive society most of its records had either mysteriously disappeared or been destroyed. In fact, she’d discovered more about Benny’s past than Legion’s. Maybe she should consider writing a definitive history of Professor Bernice Summerfield, famed archaeologist and adventurer, instead.

Or... maybe... it would be a good idea to stop standing around thinking to no real effect and just go inside.

With a deep breath, Ruth pushed open the door and walked in.

More grot, she reflected. The corrugated metal continued within. She couldn’t work out if they were trying to go for an industrial chic theme or just couldn’t be bothered to cover up the prefabricated walls and girders. The lighting was dim (probably a blessing, she thought), the clientele dimmer, and the whole place had the air of somewhere which only kept going because no one could be bothered to shut it down.

She peered into the gloom. In the far corner she saw a figure hunched over a table staring mournfully into a drink. A finger was bobbing what looked like a cherry up and down in it.

Trying not to catch the eye of the guy behind the counter who looked like he was wiping a cloth over some sorry looking pies Ruth made her way over and sat gingerly down on the seat opposite. It seemed like an age before she could think of anything to say.

‘How is it?’ she asked.

‘Blue,’ Benny replied, not bothering to look up.

‘I can see that.’ Ruth said looking at the lurid drink with which Benny was toying.

‘It is blue, it tastes blue, it’s making me blue.’ Benny pushed the glass away and Ruth caught a faint whiff of something sweet and artificial.

Benny looked up and around then stared intently at her.

‘Hey, you didn’t come here on your own did you?’ she said.

‘Well yes,’ Ruth replied. ‘It was fine. It was closer than I thought, nearly walked straight past it.’

‘Oh for crying out... How many times do I have to tell you that Legion is not a planet you go walking about alone?’ Benny arched an eyebrow as Ruth opened her mouth to reply, ‘Rhetorical question. This is not a nice planet. With not nice people out to do not nice things, especially to people who are daft enough to wander around alone wearing big ‘please mug me’ badges.’

‘Hey, hang on...’

Benny cut her off. ‘Oh sorry, did you forget to put yours on? Ruth, this is frontier territory, dangerous, semi-lawless, well almost totally lawless, out-for-itself, I’m all right Jacksonville. You just don’t go out ‘all on your lonesome’ if you’ve got any sense and I’ve...’

‘How did you get here?’ Ruth cut across her.

‘What?’ Benny paused.

‘How did you get here?’ Ruth repeated her eyes wide and innocent. ‘Did you walk? Alone? By yourself? On your lonesome?’

Benny sighed. ‘Okay, okay, okay. Fair point. But I have been doing this a bit longer than you. I’ve had a bit more experience...’

‘Well, it’s not like I haven’t had any experience myself,’ Ruth interrupted, ‘and with Peter’s reputation I think it’s finally beginning to sink in around here that it wouldn’t be a good idea to mess with his Mum or her friends.’

‘Well you shouldn’t rely on that, but yes, bad example to set. Mea culpa. I’m not having the best of days,’ she finished slightly lamely.

‘I know,’ Ruth replied. ‘That’s why I came looking for you. It must be hard for you and I thought you could use some company. I know this is a tough day and you really shouldn’t spend it alone.’

‘I cope best with it on my own,’ Benny said returning her gaze to the blue liquid in her glass.

‘I don’t understand why you need to cope with it at all. You don’t have to do this you know. It’s self-inflicted.’

‘I know thank you. But I’ve done my best to do it every year for as long as I can remember. Not always the same date, mind you, but still, it’s good discipline.’

‘But it makes you so utterly miserable,’ Ruth said, ‘and I really don’t see what good it does.’

‘It’s detox,’ Benny muttered.

‘For one day a year?’

‘All right, no, not much of a detox, I suppose. But it’s an important ritual for me. Gives the old vital organs an annual day off. I should give it a name, really. Um... Not-So-Good Friday? Mead-Free Monday? Oh, I don’t know... Bankidney Holiday? Oh, wait, got it. Liverestmass.’

Ruth sighed. ‘Oh, ho, ho, ho. One day’s abstinence so you can soak it for the remaining however

many days there are in a year on whichever planet we happen to be on? I'm sure your body's very grateful. I'm just not sure the rest of us are. You've been a prize misery since you decided to do this yesterday, almost unbearable today and I can't imagine you'll be much better once it's all over.'

'Well thanks for coming all this way to tell me that. You've really helped improve my mood. Good job.'

'Okay. Sorry. That wasn't why I came. I just thought a bit of company might make the day go faster. Look, maybe we could go somewhere a bit more cheerful? Although,' she looked around again at the seedy dive, 'finding somewhere a bit less cheerful would be difficult.'

'It suits my mood,' Benny replied looking bleakly into her drink again.

'It's probably making it a lot worse,' Ruth replied trying to adopt a cheery but not over-irritating persona. 'Come on, let's head to Irving's. And I'll buy you some food and a less depressing drink. What do you say?'

Benny looked up and gave a slight smile. 'Couldn't make the day much grimmer could it? Go on then.'

Ruth stood up and made for the door which was still open from when she had arrived. She stopped in the doorway.

'There. See. The rain's easing. It's getting better already.'

Benny rose, picked up her drink and poured it into a plant pot on the floor by the counter. Instantly the plant's leaves started to turn brown and curl up. She shuddered and hurried out after Ruth.

*

As they made their way to The White Rabbit, Ruth regaled her with stories of her frustrated attempts at historical research. Benny kept glancing from left to right, eyeing the alleys and darkened doorways nervously. Even the main thoroughfare, where at least there was some bustle and excitement among the market stalls, made her feel uncomfortable, as if some ominous pall was hanging over everything. She wasn't normally this jittery she reminded herself, it must be the lack of alcohol in her system. That or Legion really was finally starting to get to her. It could be such an unrelentingly depressing place.

Thankfully, one small beacon of light and hope was waiting round the corner.

Irving's bar stood in the middle of yet another nondescript street, wedged between a warehouse and the shabby offices of a dodgy freight company. Bright, neon lights lit up the outside, which was neither drab nor pre-fab, unlike so many of the other buildings in this part of town. In another part of the city it would have been a distinctly average establishment, but in this neighbourhood it was decidedly smart: moderately tasteful decor, just about bearable background music, reasonably comfy seats, and not too bad drinks. All in all a tolerable enough place to while away a few hours.

Usually.

Today, though, there was something very wrong. It wasn't unusual to see a couple of brawling drunks outside the Rabbit, or inside for that matter. But to see twenty or more in full, fisticuff flow was certainly something out of the ordinary. Possibly unique.

‘Where’s Peter when you need him,’ Ruth said in a half whisper, ‘and what do we do now?’

Perking up, Benny grabbed her hand.

‘We go in of course. This day could turn out to be better than I thought.’

Managing somehow to pick their way through prone bodies and to avoid flying upper cuts and kicking feet, the pair arrived unscathed at the bar entrance. Just at the door, they both had to duck as the arm of a large, vermillion-faced humanoid swung out over their heads, his clenched fist connecting with the base of the skull of a tall, thin, feline creature who was swaying drunkenly behind them and it dropped to the ground seemingly without even realising what had hit it. Benny clapped her hands politely.

‘Oh well done, sir. If there was ever a place to witness the classic rabbit punch. But please don’t do it again, it’s very dangerous. Now, I don’t suppose you could get out of our way, by any chance? My friend and I are just dying for a soft drink.’

Benny gently pushed the florid man aside before he could get his alcohol addled brain into gear and she and Ruth strolled inside.

*

The place was packed. Even more packed than normal. It wasn’t as though The White Rabbit had ever been the classiest joint, or indeed on the list of classy joints, but even by its usual standards it was looking tacky. The whole of the main bar had been decked out in traditional Advent decorations, but now those had been pushed aside, covered up or taken down altogether to make way for some truly gaudy posters, fliers and bunting advertising something called Yarryl’s Root Vegetable Chips. Even the traditional yellow Advent saucepan-sun hanging from the ceiling had a hat, or tea cosy, stuck on it with the words ‘Yarryl’s – Yum! Yum!’ emblazoned across it.

There was the same range of low-lifes inside as usual propping up the bar and sliding down the walls, but this time each and every one of them had a large bowl of chips in their hand and was busy stuffing them away with scant regard for any table manners. There were bowls of chips on the tables as well and whenever one was finished, one of the two Robo-drones would come over to refill it.

It was all horrible, and it was everywhere.

‘It looks like an explosion in a marketing department,’ Benny moaned, her brief good spirits evaporating. ‘I was expecting to be able to be miserable quietly with some close friends. Not to sit in the middle of a merry munch fest.’

‘It’s free food,’ Ruth pointed out helping herself to a handful from the bowl. ‘Try one.’

Hesitantly, Benny selected a bright green chip and popped it in her mouth. She chewed thoughtfully. ‘No idea what it is but it’s not bad at all. Bit salty perhaps but not bad.’

‘Can you see Jack?’ Ruth asked, peering through the crowd.

‘Behind the bar?’ suggested Benny.

They pushed through the crowd and slowly eased their way to the front of the throng around the bar.

There Jack stood silent and morose, his eyes glowing, ears twitching and looking more than a

little disconsolate.

‘You not rushed off your feet?’ asked Benny glancing at the large numbers crowding around.

‘You’d think,’ said Jack. ‘Trouble is they’re only buying a couple of drinks then making them last as long as they can while they eat the freebies. We’ve barely sold anything above the usual tonight even though we must have at least five times as many people in here.’

‘How come they’re all so drunk then?’ Ruth asked.

‘They’re arriving like that,’ Jack said, ‘Word’s getting around that we’ve got free food so they’re stocking up on the drinks at home then coming here for dinner.’

‘You’re not rationing them,’ Benny said. ‘Human, or whatever, nature being what it is if you put a pile of free food down you can’t be too surprised if people scoff the lot. Try limiting the amount you put out.’

‘Anyway,’ she asked popping another luridly coloured chip in her mouth, ‘what’s all this about? It’s unlike Irving to go for all this marketing razzmatazz. Much too high profile for his taste.’

‘Well, while we’ve been away, the bar has been struggling a bit apparently, so I think Irving is trying out some alternative sources of funding. Yarryl’s approached him about this promotion and he said he’d give it a go.’

‘Irving?’ Benny said, her eyes boggling. ‘Willingly promoting fast food? That sounds more than a little out of character. It can’t be that simple.’

‘He is getting paid,’ Jack pointed out.

‘Hmmm. I’m sure that helps but it’s still odd,’ Benny replied, as she absently picked a third chip out of a bowl and chewed on it. ‘Who, or what, is/are Yarryl’s anyway?’

‘Adam Yarryl.’ Jack had stopped looking at Benny and was now studying the smears on the surface of a ‘self-cleaning’ glass. ‘Self-made multi-multi-billionaire. Though his father was successful and left him a bit too.’

‘Chip off the old block, then.’ Benny interjected. Ruth groaned.

‘Hey, there’s more from where that came from, don’t you worry.’

Jack ignored them and carried on. ‘They call him the Tuber Tycoon, apparently. Well, that’s what the publicity says. Actually, it might have been the Veggie Viscount – only joking. It’s all healthy, organic stuff he uses. Supposedly. And he’s one for the ladies apparently, assuming that’s not more marketing hype of course. What do you think?’ Jack cocked his head in the direction of the far corner where there was a life-sized, cardboard cutout of some goon grinning inanely and holding up oversized packs of Yarryl’s chips.

‘He’s not unattractive. He looks as though he’s been working out,’ said Ruth. She came to a decision. ‘I wouldn’t say no.’

Benny looked at her. ‘Say no to multi-multi-billionaire Adam Yarryl? Who would have thought.’ She glanced back at the cutout. ‘He’s okay. For touched-up, soft-focus cardboard. Real life might be a different story.’

‘By the way, can I get you anything to drink?’ asked Jack before noticing Ruth making ‘no’

gestures behind Benny's head. He clamped his mouth shut, but too late.

'Oh thanks, yeah, thanks for that – I just needed reminding. Do I want anything to drink? Of course I want something to drink. I'm gasping for something to drink. But not today.' She subsided into a grouchy silence.

Jack looked at Ruth and raised his eyebrows.

'She's having a dry day,' Ruth said, 'It's once a year and she's calling it Liverestmass. Because of the season.'

'And before you say anything, Jackie-boy, I know. That'll be 'Liverest-vent' to you. Trips lightly off the tongue doesn't it?' Benny scratched her nose, 'Why you lot can't just call it Christmas like everyone else, I don't know.'

'Right. Yes. Sorry. How about a bilgeberry juice?' he asked reaching for a bottle of opaque sludge-green liquid.

Benny glared at him.

'Maybe not,' he said placing it hurriedly back on the shelf.

After a short pause, she made her choice. 'Fizzy water. With ice. And a cherry.'

'Same for me please,' said Ruth, with a little too much enthusiasm.

Once Jack had served them their drinks, there was a long, uncomfortable pause. Several times both Ruth and Jack looked as though they were about to speak but a glance at Benny stayed them.

Jack started looking round for a customer to serve but they were all too busy crunching their way through the last of the free chips.

The silence dragged on.

'Well this is fun,' murmured Ruth under her breath.

Benny looked up from contemplating the bubbles popping on the surface of her water, but before she could speak the street door opened and the suave, expensively suited figure of Irving Braxiatel walked in, shrugging his coat off as he entered.

He made his way swiftly through the crowds, skilfully managing to avoid contact with anyone without obviously needing to duck and weave, disappeared into his office, and shut the door.

A few moments later the door reopened. Irving pointed towards Benny and beckoned with a crooked finger. Benny glared back at him, then pointed towards herself. Irving nodded and beckoned again. Benny's glare grew deeper. She shrugged her shoulders and turned back to stare at the bar. After a pause Ruth tapped her on the shoulder. She looked up and round to see Irving still standing in the doorway.

Benny sighed and slid off her bar stool. She wasn't in the mood for these games today and in the end she knew her curiosity was going to get the better of her. Might as well face it now as postpone the inevitable, she thought, as she walked towards the office.

By the time she reached the door Irving had disappeared inside and Benny did likewise.

'Well that was jolly,' Jack said as the door closed.

‘I think I might have that proper drink you offered now,’ Ruth replied.

‘I may just join you,’ he said.

*

‘Abstinence does not sit well with you does it Bernice?’ Irving said as she slouched into the office.

‘Spare me,’ she replied slumping down unbidden into a chair. ‘I don’t know why I’m putting myself through this now. I suppose I just figure that I should be able to go at least one day a year alcohol-free. And don’t ask me why because I’m not sure I can come up with a cogent reason. But if I was pushed, perhaps being here, back with Peter again, reminds me I still have responsibilities. Not just to myself, but to others. Yes, that makes sense in my head...’ She stopped. ‘How did you know I wasn’t drinking?’

‘The look on your face’ he replied settling behind his desk, ‘and your general demeanour, body language, sour expression, air of quiet desperation. Oh, and that glass of water you were staring into.’

‘It had bubbles. It could have been a gin and tonic.’

‘If it was a gin and tonic, the glass wouldn’t still have been full.’

She held up her hands in mock submission.

‘What do you want, Irving?’

‘Irving,’ he said pointedly.

‘That’s what I said.’

‘Oh, did you? Force of habit.’

‘I’m making an effort. Although I might lapse if I don’t like what you’re going to say.’

Irving shifted a little uneasily in his chair and cleared his throat.

‘I would protest that you are making unwarranted assumptions about the nature of our relationship with your initial question there. But in fairness you probably have a good point. So I will forbear. Although it wouldn’t be strictly correct to say that I want something. I merely seek a favour. Nothing onerous.’

‘That’ll be a first. Your favours usually involve at least two moments when I wish I’d kept my life insurance payments up to date. Does “nothing onerous” mean there’ll just be one this time?’

‘Not at all. Unless you have a severe allergy to vegetable chips,’ he replied, pushing a stiff piece of card towards her over the desk.

She glanced down at it and skimmed the embossed lettering.

‘Really? Just that?’ she asked.

‘Yes, just that.’

‘No strings?’

‘No strings.’

‘With you or alone?’

‘Oh alone. Bit too high profile for me.’

Benny slid the card back to him across the desk. It was time to get serious.

‘Irving, you said you were going to get me work. Proper, paid, archaeological, roll my sleeves up, get down and dirty work.’

‘That is true and I am.’

‘Your last job for me, with Ruth and Jack in tow, was to play postwoman and deliver documents from a wealthy madman to his mad scientist. It’s taken these past two weeks flying half way round the galaxy to do it, and apart from an unexpected incident on the planet Nemeqit, it was hardly what I would call satisfying or fulfilling in the archaeology sense of our working relationship.’ She leant over the desk and stared directly into his eyes. ‘And now you want me to go to a party.’

‘I am sorry, Bernice, and I sympathise with the frustration you obviously feel, but I promise, everything we do is moving us forward towards achieving our ultimate objective.’ He twinkled winningly. ‘I assure you.’

‘Oh yes.’ Benny wasn’t convinced.

‘This invitation is one such step forward.’

‘You’re not kidding.’

‘Adam Yarryl is a very rich man in a time when money is a little difficult to find. What’s more Mr Yarryl is an archaeology freak. He currently sponsors over a hundred digs and historical site preservations on almost as many planets. All funded out of his incredibly successful snack food empire.’

‘Are you having me on?’

‘On the contrary. Wherever he builds his factories, he excavates the precious legacies of lost civilisations and creates wonderful museums to put it all in. He’s also a great benefactor to already established ones. I’m surprised you haven’t heard of him by now.’

‘So am I,’ Benny said, picking up the card again and studying it more closely this time.

‘He would appear to have heard of you.’

‘Has he now?’

‘Apparently he’s a bit of a fan.’

Benny looked up, raised an eyebrow and waited for him to continue.

‘He’s currently surveying the frontier planets out this way. It’s good to see such pioneering spirit in a man, don’t you think? Exploring new worlds, new horizons. Pushing the boundaries of human experience, culture, technology...’

‘Innovation?’ Benny added.

‘That sort of thing, yes. The important stuff.’

‘Like tastier crisps.’

‘That sort of thing. He’s being kept away from Legion, of course, but I thought showing an interest in his product, however unappealing it might be to myself, might help the Rabbit and might just lead him to think about helping me fund a bright, young...ish -’ Benny frowned at him ‘- and quite brilliant archaeologist.

Irving stood up and walked once round the room before coming back to sit on the edge of the desk. He looked appealingly at her and pointed a finger at the invitation.

‘Will you do this for me, Bernice? For us?’

She paused and scratched the end of her nose which had begun to itch intensely. ‘All right then. Not really my thing but I don’t see why not.’

‘Excellent,’ he said beaming at her which only seemed to make the itch worse.

‘Hold your horses though, there’s a price.’

‘Oh really?’ he said, ‘And what might that be?’

‘Straight after I come back from this I want a nice, relaxing holiday for me and the gang. Just a few days away. Help us get ourselves ready for the Advent Extravaganza you’re planning. I think we deserve a treat. I was thinking Bella Sol.’

He gaped. ‘Very expensive. I’m not sure...’

She cut him off. ‘Call it an overdue bonus for past good work.’

Irving pondered for a while.

‘Yes all right. That doesn’t seem unreasonable.’

‘Okay buster, you’ve got yourself a deal,’ Benny said, pleased for the first time that day.

‘How will you get there?’ Irving asked.

‘The same way I’m getting to this party, I imagine. In the shuttle. Oh, and that’s another thing. Naming the shuttle *Irverfield* without consulting me. I’m still not happy.’

‘Maybe we can talk about that another time,’ Irving said quickly.

‘Maybe we shall.’

He nodded and pointed to the card.

‘If you look the invitation is for tomorrow, I’m afraid. When exactly does your no alcohol period end?’

‘Oh, just about now, I think.’

She leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes. The itch in her nose finally got the better of her and she sneezed violently.

CHAPTER THREE

THE BEST THINGS IN LIFE...

The itch in her nose finally got the better of her and she sneezed violently.

‘Pardon. Sorry.’ Ruth sniffed.

‘Not caught anything I hope,’ Benny remarked from the pilot’s chair at the front of the flight-deck. She had been running a check over the systems noting, with satisfaction, that everything appeared to be working perfectly.

‘No, it won’t be that,’ Ruth answered. ‘It’s one of these flowers. I hope I’m not developing an allergy. Anyway,’ she continued, ‘how could you possibly catch anything on Bella Sol? It’s just too... oh, I don’t know... lovely.’

Benny, Ruth and Jack were returning from their pre-Advent holiday. As resort planets go, Bella Sol had to a score a good nine and a half out of ten. Just prior to their leaving, they and the interior of the shuttle had been garlanded with the most gorgeous flowers, in a stunning variety of species brought in from various recently colonised worlds, some of which neither Benny nor her companions had ever seen before.

‘It was indeed lovely. Restful. Calming. Tranquil. Peaceful... I could have stayed there for... oh at least another day before I’d have been bored out of my mind,’ Benny said, ‘there’s only so much unremitting niceness I can take.’

Ruth picked an ivory-coloured flower from one of the garlands festooning her chair, walked over to Benny and carefully pushed the stem behind her left ear.

‘Oh come on,’ she chided, ‘you can’t tell me you didn’t enjoy yourself.’

‘Of course I did,’ Benny relented, ‘it’s just that I have a low tolerance for loveliness. I get suspicious after a while. Usually about ten minutes, so three days is going it a bit for me.’

Ruth was a bit confused. ‘I don’t understand why you seem so subdued about it.’

‘It is a shame I couldn’t have enjoyed it a little more than I did, but under the circumstances...’

‘What circumstances?’ enquired Ruth, but before she could get a reply, Jack strolled onto the bridge. He was grinning. He hadn’t stopped grinning since they left.

‘Wow, that was all a bit special, wasn’t it?’

‘Yes so you keep telling us and the less said about that the better,’ Benny quipped, ‘there are things I just don’t need or want to know about, and I came worryingly close to finding out stuff about you that... well... quite...’ She tailed off, trying to ignore the grin which was now threatening to split his face in two.

‘Hmmm, all those lovely people,’ Jack went on.

‘The people were lovely, yes,’ Ruth said staring dreamily out of one of the viewing ports at a distant nebula.

‘The people weren’t people. Well not people, people. They were formed by the matrix of the pleasure complex to conform to whatever you most desired,’ Benny pointed out. Not for the first time.

‘And did they ever conform.’

‘Jack, please,’ Benny pleaded, ‘I’m trying to fly a spaceship. And not be ill.’

‘Anyway, we all had a lovely time, nothing bad happened, no invasions, no omnipotent entities, no giant lizards, etcetera etcetera etcetera so I call that a good holiday,’ Ruth said shifting her attention back inside the shuttle’s cabin.

Although, she reflected, shuttle didn’t really do it justice. Since Irving had waved his magic money wand over it, it was more like a space-faring yacht. Beautifully appointed inside, sleek, elegant, and immensely comfortable. If space travel was always like this you’d never get her back on a planet. Unless it was Bella Sol, of course.

‘Peter would have loved it all, I’m sure. It’s sad he wouldn’t come with us.’

Ruth snapped her mouth shut and mentally slapped herself repeatedly for not so much mentioning the elephant in the room as shining a big lamp on it, jumping up and down shouting ‘Elephant!’

‘Look, I have to accept that he’s a busy man. I can’t make him come,’ Benny replied. ‘If he doesn’t want to,’ she added to herself.

Typically, Jack opted to stir it. ‘I heard it was a problem with Antonio rather than work. Lovers tiff, I bet. Could be the end.’ He sounded almost gleeful.

Benny riled. ‘I sincerely hope not. I haven’t even met him yet.’

Ruth glared at Jack. Now was not the moment to bring up the subject of Antonio, that was not a can of worms she wanted to prise open. Seeking a distraction she returned her gaze to the nebula.

‘Oooh look!’ she shouted.

In its depths something had exploded causing a plume of gas to ignite. A moment later a second flare erupted exciting a chain reaction of smaller ignitions as clouds of gas bloomed within. The colours shifted and changed like oil on water.

‘Benny that’s beautiful. Is that why you brought us back this way?’

‘Well,’ Benny said slowly, ‘I’d love to claim that I knew that was going to happen, but honestly no. I did come this way, because I’d been told it was more, shall we say, scenic, but the son et lumiere show is an added extra. Hold on, I’ll power down and turn us to get a view through the main screen.’

‘It’s amazing,’ Jack exclaimed.

‘It is isn’t it?’ Benny agreed, ‘Sometimes you just get lucky I guess. A cascade reaction in a nebula is rare but very very beautiful to watch. Not quite so beautiful to be in the middle of, but very very lovely to watch from a safe distance.’

‘This *is* a safe distance isn’t it?’ Ruth asked.

‘Oh heavens yes, far too far away to be any risk to us. Just something lovely to look at,’ Benny said, hoping she wasn’t tempting fate too much with her confident assurances.

The three stared out at the nebula as the colours continued to play through the cloud. Benny briefly looked away and watched the awed faces of her companions instead. All the money in the galaxy, all

the fun on Bella Sol, she thought, couldn't buy or better anything as special as this moment.

'I did wonder why we'd come quite such a long way around,' Jack eventually said, 'this is a bit of a way outside the normal space lanes.'

'Yes, um... the route was suggested to me. Sort of,' Benny confessed.

'Sort of?' Jack queried.

'I'll tell you later,' she said returning her attention to the light show.

*

The *Irverfield*, its name newly stencilled in large, black lettering on the side, had slowed to a near stop and turned to face the extraordinary astronomical phenomena before it. With all their attention focussed forwards no one on board was paying any heed to the rear as something large, dark and belching steam from its ruptured guts bore down on them.

*

The silence on the shuttle was broken by an urgent bleeping from the exterior sensors. Benny reached across and brought up a display.

'Something's coming up our rear. God, I hate tailgaters.' Her expression hardened as she studied the display. 'It's a freighter.'

'That's a freighter?' Ruth exclaimed, her eyes widening, 'But it's... it's so... I can't think of a big enough word that's big enough.'

'How about gargantuan?' Jack chipped in.

'Very good word,' said Benny, 'Look at that gargantuan ship. What do you reckon? 800 metres stem to stern?' She studied the sensor readings again. 'Yep. 804 to be exact. And it's approaching fast. A lot faster than something that size should be. Main engines are phasing. There are structural weaknesses throughout the body of it and they're all under stress due to the speed it's going. It's not good.' She looked back up. 'That thing's shaking itself apart.'

Her hands played over the instruments and a close-up of the freighter appeared on the main viewer. As they watched, they could see that it was quite literally shaking, like an animal suffering a fit.

'Look at it,' Jack said, examining the image closely, 'That's a ship in serious trouble if I ever saw one.'

'And our serious trouble is that it's not stopping. Time to move, I think.' Benny fired up the engines and pushed the shuttle into a nose dive out of the plane of the freighter.

*

As the *Irverfield* slipped swiftly and smoothly out of harm's way, the vast bulk of the freighter ploughed relentlessly through the space where it had been. Moments later it gave a final convulsive shudder before the pulsing, dark red glow from the propulsion outlets cut out completely. As it gradually slowed to a stop the lights along the ship dimmed and died. A few flickered feebly back

into life again as a series of small explosions tore holes in its side before automatic repair systems went to work to seal them, though some remained all too obviously unrepaired. The freighter seemed only just to be clinging on to life. Silently the shuttle rose up behind it and hung there, watching and waiting.

*

They all nearly jumped out of their skins when a male voice boomed through the cabin.

‘Mayday. Emergency. This is freighter... umm... F-one. We are in distress, I repeat, we are in serious distress. Our current position co-ordinates are 0908. 66140. 59317. Sector Delta 19 Gamma Gamma. Request immediate assistance. I repeat, please assist.’ After a crackle the message repeated. Benny was the first to react.

‘Distress call,’ she said, just in case – she thought – any of her companions had suddenly become very very stupid.

‘Can you track it?’ Jack asked.

Benny pointed at the dark hulk on the viewer. ‘Well, I think it probably came from over there,’ she replied, wondering if, perhaps they really had been taking the dimwit pills.

‘I realise that. I mean where on the ship?’

‘Well, presumably the main flight deck.’

‘Not necessarily. Run a check. In fact, why don’t you let me...’

‘Oh no. I’m not letting you get in this chair. Just you stand still. Right there.’ Benny scanned the display. ‘Ooo, guess what?’

Neither Jack or Ruth were in the mood to play.

‘Just tell us,’ he said.

‘It’s coming from the main flight deck.’ Her triumphal ‘so there’ look disappeared as the message abruptly cut off.

‘That didn’t last very long. What happened?’ asked Ruth staring over Jack’s shoulder.

‘Good question,’ said Benny. ‘Could be any number of reasons. Could spend hours speculating. Or, could go and find out.’

‘Is it safe?’ Ruth started to say, then stopped. ‘Of course it’s not safe. I don’t know why I even asked that. But if they need our help we should go.’

‘That’s the spirit.’ Benny grinned at her. ‘It’s a distress call. We’re duty bound anyway. Once more into the breaches.’

‘Breaches?’ Jack asked absently.

‘In the hull...? Breaches...? Henry the fifth?’ Benny said then sighed, ‘Why do I bother?’

‘Henry the who?’ said Ruth.

‘Oh forget it. Come on. Docking manoeuvres. Looks like there’s a functioning port on the

underside at the rear.’

‘A bit of a walk to the flight deck, then,’ Jack said.

‘I’ve got great legs, Jack, and more people know that than I ought to admit to.’

Benny accelerated the shuttle towards the stricken freighter.

‘Those engines don’t look too healthy,’ Ruth said.

‘They’re not, but I don’t think there’s much risk of them blowing. They were phasing but they’re not showing signs of doing anything now. Although it’s really not my field. Jack what do you think?’

Jack stared at the display then looked up at the image on the monitor which was growing larger by the second. He scratched above his temple. ‘It’s not really my field either,’ he said after suitable rumination.

Benny rolled her eyes and Ruth sniggered.

‘What? What did I say?’

‘Never mind. Come on, docking prep. Let’s see what we can do to help. Oh and whatever happens you stay put,’ she said to Jack, ‘we don’t know what sort of reception we’ll get but given my track record I wouldn’t bet on it being the red carpet. I want you in reserve in case there’s a problem or we need to leave in a hurry. Our secret little back-up man.’

‘I’m touched,’ Jack replied.

‘No comment,’ Benny said as she and Ruth made to exit.

‘Does that mean I can sit in the...’

‘No!’ she called back, as the flight deck door slid closed behind them.

*

The docking systems engaged smoothly, more so than Benny had expected given the state of the freighter. She uncrossed her fingers and was just about to open the airlock when Jack’s voice came over the intercom.

‘Benny, I’ve just run a check on currently listed commercial ships and I’ve found nothing called Freighter F1. The phrase ‘Made Up Name’ is flashing in my head. What do you think?’

‘Okay. I’ll turn the curiosity, anxiety and extreme caution up to eleven – are you sitting in my chair?’

Jack made indignant but wholly unconvincing noises, but Benny ignored him.

‘Never mind, just don’t you dare leave without us. And don’t forget to codelock the door. I don’t want anything nasty getting in, thanks.’

‘The pleasure’s all mine. I’m sure,’ Jack responded.

‘Try not to fall asleep. But if you have to, only one eye at a time. You know I never thought I’d have to say this again, but I’ll try to keep in ‘radio’ contact. Irving may have done up the inside of the ship like a luxury liner, but he hasn’t updated the comms gear. Wrist communicators – I ask you.’

On the flight deck, Jack was studying the comms panel. ‘That might be problematic if there are leaks from the engines. I’ll be lucky to hear one word in twenty over background emissions.’

‘So you are an expert on engines after all.’ Ruth ribbed him.

‘No, but I do know a little about communications,’ Jack said.

‘Okay, it’s Serious Time now, chaps,’ Benny butted in, ‘let’s hope we don’t run into too much trouble. No trouble at all is probably a forlorn hope, so let’s aim for minimal.’ She shucked on a thermally controlled jacket and handed one to Ruth then operated the airlock opening mechanism and started up the ladder. ‘Here we go.’

*

They stepped into near darkness. Emergency lights cast a sepia gloom through the clouds of smoke which hung in the hot stale air.

Once their eyes had adjusted they saw they were in a sort of antechamber to the docking bay that ended in another door. They went through that emerging into a long, wide passageway, with supporting central pillars set at intervals along it. The wall on the right was peppered with dents, scores and scratches. The damage appeared to have come from the lefthand wall. A massive rupture had been ripped in it, clearly by a very powerful explosion. The gash it had left extended a good ten metres down the passage and was as tall as Ruth in some places. Jagged shards of metal, lumps of melted and warped plastic, broken cables and piping of various sorts hung everywhere and debris from the blast covered the floor. In the distance an alarm sounded feebly.

Every few minutes from deep in the infrastructure small bangs and cracks could be heard and there were constant sounds of spitting, sparking electrical shorts.

‘Wow. This is a mess. Wonder what happened? Were they attacked?’ asked Ruth.

‘I don’t think so. There were no signs on the hull of external impacts from weapons, nor something natural like meteorites. Judging by this bloody great hole in the wall, the blast has mostly been directed inwards, rather than exploding out. As if the fault, or whatever, had been within the cabling contained in the wall itself. Suggesting... sabotage? Mutiny perhaps? Massive systems failure? But where are the bodies? But all the evidence so far is that this is internal damage. It’s odd though. I mean this is old, it’s clearly seen better days, but damage this extensive? It all seems to have happened very fast. And there’s no crew down here trying to fix it. No injured or dying. Thankfully. Which really doesn’t make any sense. You’d expect to be doing constant running repairs on an old crate like this but this looks like a sudden catastrophic series of failures.’ As she mused out loud Benny had been making her way cautiously along the gash examining the innards, taking care not to touch anything.

‘Only one way to really find out,’ said Ruth. ‘Let’s get to the bridge. We might find the crew there if they’re still on board, and alive.’

‘Good point, come on then,’ said Benny, ‘just watch your step, there’s a few... oooo now that’s interesting.’ She broke off and pulled a torch from her jacket pocket.

‘What?’ said Ruth, ‘Oh yes I see what you mean. That is... strange, isn’t it?’

‘It certainly is,’ Benny agreed.

About thirty metres down from them, there was something wrong with the righthand wall. Benny had never needed to wear optical correction, but this was what it must be like if you did and you'd left it at home she thought. It was like being selectively drunk. In one place, there seemed to be two walls, like a ghosting effect. When Ruth and Benny moved a few paces to the side of where they had been standing, there was nothing unusual. When they moved back it was two walls again. They repeated the movement a couple of times to make sure.

'Do you know what I think?' said Benny excitedly, 'I think there's a malfunctioning force field and holographic projection of the wall onto itself, and judging by the size and shape I'm guessing that it's hiding a door. That looks door-shaped to me don't you agree?'

Ruth nodded.

Benny examined the edges of the spectral wall, then inspiration struck. She rummaged in her pockets and pulled out a palm sized badge with 'Yarryl's' written on one side and a piece of flexible black material stuck on the other.

'Fridge magnet,' she announced. 'Picked it up at the promotion.'

'And you've kept it in your pocket all this time?'

'I haven't seen a fridge to put it on.'

'Haven't you washed them?'

'What?'

'Your trousers. You slob.'

'Of course I've washed them.'

'So it's you who never empties your pockets before you put things in the machine.' Ruth huffed. She took the magnet from Benny's hand.

'Oh, there's something handwritten here.'

Benny snatched it back. 'Never mind that.'

'What are you going to do with it?' Ruth asked.

Benny indicated the hologram. 'I've seen things like this before, and sometimes the functions on them are operated by magnetic keys. I'm hoping something might happen if I wave this about over it.'

'And there was me thinking you knew what you were doing.'

Benny raised the magnet and, after a few seconds weaving it up and down, as much to her surprise as Ruth's there was a click-rattle-click and the hologram broke up into pixels and dispersed. Leaving behind it a large and very solid-looking door.

She tapped at it experimentally. 'Duralinium?' she mused. She tapped again. 'Maybe. Seems a bit heavy-duty for this ship. And a bit new and shiny. It's not an original part of the structure. So I wonder what it's here for, and, more interestingly, what's behind it?'

'Why don't you open it and find out?' asked Ruth.

'Well, clever clogs, partly because I don't know what's inside and anything that needs something

this solid to keep it in, or us out, should probably be treated with some degree of respect, but mostly because it doesn't appear to have any opening mechanism. At least not one I can see. Maybe it's opened remotely. Perhaps from the bridge.'

'Well then the sooner we get there the better then,' Ruth said as she set off again. A few paces later she turned back to find Benny still staring at the door.

'Locked doors,' Benny said, half to herself, 'it's like a personal challenge. Never could resist a locked door. If someone doesn't want me to know what's on the other side it only makes me that much more determined to find out.'

Ruth sighed. 'Well staring at it won't open it.'

'No, sadly, but I really do want to know what's behind it. And what on earth something this high-security is doing on a ship that should have been decommissioned long ago. It's just so out of place.'

Ruth wasn't listening anymore. She was peering into the gloom of the long transom, sure she had heard something. She waved at Benny to be quiet.

'Hello,' she called, taking a few tentative steps forward. 'Hello. Anybody there? We're here to...'

Benny flapped her arms at her, 'Shush. We don't know what happened here. Who's on board. What state they're in. Nothing. Going around bellowing at the tops of our voices may not be our safest course of action. They may be frightened. There may be very nervous, very trigger-happy security guards, or soldiers, or the walking dead for all we know. Best not to startle them. After all we don't want to find ourselves with... oh...'

'What is it?' Ruth said then turned back to look at Benny. 'Oh.'

Benny was standing motionless, the muzzle of a gun pressed hard into her back. A man's voice spoke. 'Turn around very, very slowly.'

Benny did as she was told and stared into the face of a wolf.

CHAPTER FOUR

SPEND, SPEND, SPEND

Benny was standing motionless, the muzzle of a gun pressed hard into her back. A man's voice spoke. 'Turn around very, very slowly.'

Benny did as she was told and stared into the face of a wolf.

No, not a wolf, just a lot of hair, or rather beard. In fact she had never seen a more poorly fitted false beard in all her fancy dress partying experience.

Right now, for the life of her, she couldn't work out why she had agreed to do this. It was all very well wangling a relaxing holiday out of Irving, but as the whole evening had been near unmitigated purgatory for her so far, she was going to bloody well need one just to recover. The interminable inane chit chat, the cheap drinks, the insipid canapés, the never ending whirl of faces staring vapidly at her, all added to her general sense of doom and despair.

'It's just a little social networking event,' Irving had said, as he saw her off in the *Irverfield* the evening before. 'It's part of the deal I'm trying to do with them. You just have to go along, clink a few glasses and make a little small talk. More a 'show your face' thing than anything else... Oh, and by the way,' he slipped smoothly into the conversation, 'it's Earth historical fancy dress. So that will be fun won't it? I managed to acquire a small selection of costumes for you to choose from from an Ikerian clothes dealer. All period apparently.'

'As if,' she had thought.

He had smiled that smile which always put her teeth on edge and she knew right there and then that she should have run screaming from the room and taken refuge in the nearest bottle of something old and strong and preferably at least 18% proof. Why, she mused, did she not listen to her instincts where that man was concerned.

Late that afternoon, once she'd docked with Yarryl's survey vessel cum space liner (the 'Snack Factor Tour Bus', as she had decided to dub it), Benny opened up her selection box of party wear.

'Queen Victoria, Mother Theresa, Margaret Thatcher or Twiggy. Thank you, Irving Braxiatel and goodnight.' After surprisingly little deliberation she opted for Twiggy. The 1960s leggy model look was probably the least of the evils on offer and she had the pins for it. Or so she liked to think.

She had since lost count of the number of times she had adjusted the over-tight mini skirt and tried to shimmy herself more comfortably into the figure-hugging top without whacking herself in the eye with the string of pearls which was draped around her neck. She looked herself up and down in the mirror in the shuttle cabin. If she was generous, she'd scrape a seven out of ten. It didn't help that yesterday's itch in her nose had now become a visible and very sore spot. She dabbed on the cover-up cream.

At the appointed hour and hoping she looked at least a little like someone who'd just walked off the cover of a 1967 fashion magazine, she strode into the ship's grand ballroom, an impressive space decked out in Yarryl's promotional paraphernalia and with a band playing on stage at the far end. Dotted around were decorated tables piled high with complimentary goodie bags and the obligatory bowls of crispy chips. The room had soon filled up with a couple of hundred other costumed guests.

One or two she even recognised, like eccentric millionaire Till Madden (were there, she wondered idly, any non-eccentric ones or was that a prerequisite to being ludicrously wealthy), who'd come as the scientist Stephen Hawking, and who seemed to be having problems with his motorised chair. As she'd expected, there were an awful lot of Elvis Presleys. She corrected herself: a lot of awful Elvis Presleys.

So, there she was at a Yarryl's Vegetable Chips promotional event, drinking nondescript warm alcohol, or she would have been if her glass wasn't empty, growing depressingly sick of vegetable chips, and increasingly regretting her choice of costume.

Since taking her coat off she had felt a breeze blowing around places that shouldn't feel a breeze and she seemed to have been attracting the sorts of glances which were going to do nothing for her reputation, social or academic.

Nonetheless, she duly schmoozed her way around the room, doing her best to look politely attentive as yet another person wafted into her environs, waffled at her for a few minutes and then drifted on. She was, by now, thoroughly bored and had just about had enough when she felt the muzzle of the gun pressing into her back and the man's beard-muffled voice asking her to turn around real slow. She was pleased to note he was as absurdly dressed as herself.

'Stick 'em up doll,' he continued in the weirdest accent she had heard in a long time. The vowels were bizarrely extended and all the words seemed to be toppling over into one another.

'I beg your pardon,' she said with not a hint of concern in her voice, as though someone had just asked her rather indistinctly what the time was.

'Ah said stick 'em up doll,' he repeated.

'Yes I know what you said. I just had no clue why you said it,' she replied. 'If this is a chat up line, it's from the bottom ten of all time. Just tell me who you are.'

'General George Armstrong Custer at your service, Lieutenant Colonel, 7th Cavalry Regiment of the United States Army.'

'Ah, right,' she said. 'That explains that accent.' She paused. 'Well, explains it. Not excuses it.'

'What's wrong with the accent?' he asked dropping back into what she assumed was his normal and, she noted, really rather charming bass baritone voice.

'Erm,' she searched for a moment for the right word. 'Possibly a little... hammy?' she tried hoping he had a sense of humour, just in case this turned out to be someone she did not want to start off by offending.

'I've been working on that for weeks.' He sounded crestfallen.

'Well I'm no expert,' she said hastily, 'don't mind me. I'm sure you were doing a fine job.' She wrinkled her nose. 'Let's pass over who I'm meant to be. Benny Summerfield,' she said holding her hand out.

'I know,' he said whipping off his his stetson, false beard and long, curly blonde wig, his face beneath beaming with delight. 'I'm Adam Yarryl. You are fantastic and I'm so honoured to meet you.'

She appraised the figure before her: late 30s, tall, sable-haired, glitteringly dark eyes, handsome,

strike that... very handsome, and wearing a very nice eau de cologne.

Benny paused mid-handshake and blinked a few times.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said looking puzzled, ‘but isn’t this the wrong way round? I’m meant to sound all impressed about meeting the host and then to have to explain who I am, not the other way about.’

‘True enough,’ he said and she tried not to melt too visibly as he flashed his smile. ‘But then I’m not a noted archaeologist and historian.’

‘Well I’m not exactly sure that I am. Not any more,’ she said smiling back.

‘Oh you do yourself a dis-service. I’ve followed your work for many years,’ he said waving around the replica revolver which sat seemingly forgotten in his hand. ‘You’ve been an inspiration to me.’

‘How flattering,’ she replied, ‘nice to know that I’ve managed to do some good.’

‘Oh you certainly have. I mean to say that history has always been something I’ve been fascinated by, but your work really piqued my interest.’ He noticed her empty glass, ‘Let me get you a drink.’

‘Now you’ve piqued my interest,’ she said and decided that the evening had taken a definite turn for the better.

*

Half an hour later and Benny, fortified by several drinks all of which had, due to the attentions of her host, been considerably better than the warm house wine, was having a much more enjoyable evening.

Many of the guests had by now drifted back to their rooms or their own docked ships, so apart from staff they were more or less alone.

Yarryl’s interest had turned out to be more than just empty flattery. This was a man who lived up to the hype.

‘We’ve just opened our fourth major dig in this quadrant,’ he was saying. ‘It’s on Tugara. Great place if you like rocks and sand.’ He turned on that smile again and Benny felt herself melt a little more inside, ‘The artefacts from the first three digs will be going on tour in the next few months while the permanent displays are being set up. And now we have the protection orders in place on the other sites we can work on those at our leisure later.’

‘Gracious,’ she said finally cutting across the stream of excited chatter which had been pouring out of Adam for some ten minutes, ‘You really are serious about all this aren’t you?’

‘Of course,’ he said blinking at her, ‘I don’t believe in half-measures. Just look around you. After all what else am I going to do with all this money I keep making.’

‘How do you mean?’ she said.

‘Well, I’ve no one to spend it on.’

‘Oh,’ she said, ‘no Mrs or Mr Yarryl?’

‘No,’ he said looking wistful, ‘no little chips off the old block either.’

‘I see what you did there,’ she laughed, ‘very good, wish I’d thought of that one.’

‘What?’

‘Chips?’ she said, suddenly wishing she hadn’t.

‘Chips? Oh right, yes, sorry. Chips. I hadn’t realised. Look. Why don’t you come and see the new dig. I’m due there tomorrow. You can come along, cast your expert eye.’

‘Well I’m really not sure that I have the time...’ she broke off. ‘Oh who am I kidding. Of course I’d love to.’

‘I’m loath to ask this so soon but maybe you could be a guest speaker at one of our dinners as well? It would be such an honour.’

‘Well, yes it would, I’m flattered,’ she said.

Again he blinked. ‘I meant for us.’

‘If you get any more charming,’ she said picking up another drink and realising that it was considerably more out of focus than the previous one had been, ‘I may just get a little bit swept away. Especially as there’s no Mrs Yarryl.’

Adam grabbed one of the goodie bags from a nearby table, rummaged around in it and pulled out a fridge magnet and pen both with the company logo on. He scribbled on the back of the magnet. She tried to see over his shoulder. ‘I do hope that’s a personal number.’

He handed the magnet over to her. ‘That’s the date and venue for the next banquet fundraiser,’ he said his face now seemingly filled by his teeth.

She hiccuped, ‘Oh. Sorry, probably saying a little bit more than I mean to. You know this really is a very good whatever it is, it’s getting even me a bit tipsy, and that takes quite a bit of doing these days.’

‘It’s vegetable based,’ he explained. ‘A byproduct of the production process for the chips. It’s a bit potent. I don’t normally serve it at functions, not unless I want them to descend into chaos, or I have some serious negotiating to do.’

Benny blinked at the dazzling rows of teeth which now appeared to be the only really discernible feature of his face and finally managed to muster a little cogency.

‘Look it’s getting late. I should probably be heading back, shouldn’t I.’ She stood and felt her legs sliding gently from underneath her. Before she collapsed back into her chair Adam’s arm snaked around her waist and held her upright.

‘Allow me,’ he said, gently removing her glass and placing it on a nearby table. ‘Look why don’t you stay here tonight. I have plenty of guest rooms.’

‘I’m sure you do,’ Benny said, ‘and a lovely big master bedroom too I’ll bet.’ She giggled, rather more inanely than she might have liked.

‘I certainly do,’ he said, ‘but I’m also a gentleman and gentlemen don’t take advantage of ladies who have had a little too much Yarryl’s Root Spirit.’

‘Really?’ Benny pouted, ‘How disappointing. Why do I always end up meeting gentlemen? Or rats? Or sometimes both?’

‘I think I should escort you to your room. Let you get some sleep and we can discuss an itinerary when we wake up in the morning.’

‘Okay,’ she said leaning on his arm as he walked her gently towards the door, ‘shall we do it over breakfast or shall I just give you a nudge?’

‘Come on,’ he said. ‘Let’s pretend you didn’t just say that.’

She put a finger to her lips and shushed no one in particular.

‘Whatever happens, stop me before I make any jokes about your Little Big Horn.’ She snorted and tittered like a little girl.

He gently steered her across the now mostly empty room to a private exit. The door opened and he ushered Benny through.

CHAPTER FIVE

QUANTITATIVE EASING

The door opened and Benny was ushered through, Ruth followed and behind them came the man with the wolf's head tattooed across his face. He jabbed Benny towards the corner of the room with his gun.

It had been a long trek through the freighter and their captor had declined any attempt at conversation. The journey had only underlined how badly damaged the freighter was and the bridge was no better.

'Hello there,' she said cheerily to two figures who stood arguing over the flight control desk. They turned to look at the new arrivals in surprise. One was a thirty something woman of Asian ancestry, the other looked the very epitome of someone you'd expect to be an annoying younger brother.

'I'm Benny, this is my friend Ruth, we picked up your signal and, well, I'm a past master when it comes to dealing with distress calls...'

'We do get rather a lot of distressing situations to deal with,' Ruth interjected.

Benny threw her a look, '...and we wondered if there was anything we could do to help.'

The woman glared evilly at the man.

'Heavens, it is a mess isn't it?' Benny continued, 'What have you been doing to it?' She moved to step further into the room but the Wolf-faced man's warning snarl stopped her.

'Not exactly loquacious, your friend,' she said gesturing back over her shoulder at him, 'or,' she added under her breath, 'fragrant.'

'Who are you?' the woman by the controls asked.

'Erm...' Benny scratched her head, 'could have sworn I just did that bit. Benny and Ruth.'

'I mean who are you as in where are you from and what are you doing out here?'

'We're taking the long way back home from a holiday to Bella Sol,' said Ruth, beating Benny to a reply.

'Bella Sol?' the man said, 'Explains the flower.' He indicated the bloom behind Benny's ear. Slightly embarrassed she removed and pocketed it.

'Our turn, I think,' she said brightly, 'Who are you?'

'With respect I don't think that's any of your concern. This is our ship, we're on a trading run, end of, all right?' the woman replied sharply. 'We're the crew,' she added, somewhat unnecessarily Benny thought.

'Okay. So what happened here? Can we help?'

'The distress call was an error, all right? An accident. We're fine. Just an overload. We can easily sort it out thanks. So you can just be on your way.'

With that the woman turned back to the controls as though Benny and Ruth had simply ceased to

exist.

The would-be rescuers looked at each other and raised mutual eyebrows.

‘An overload?’ Benny asked incredulously. ‘Excuse me, but if this is an overload then I’ve a degree from Heidelberg University.’

The crew ignored her.

‘Look, it’s really not a problem. We can leave the systems here on tick-over, take you to the nearest space-dock, you can pick up a repair ship, come back and they can patch things up.’

‘We can’t leave our cargo,’ the woman snapped. ‘We’re going to get the engines restarted.’

‘Are you sure that’s a good idea?’ Benny asked, ‘they looked pretty beat-up to me. Your cargo will be fine here. After all you’re a good way off the main shipping routes, it’s not like anyone is going to stumble across you.’

‘Like you, you mean,’ said the man pointedly.

‘Okay, highly unlikely a second time, and if you go onto tick-over it won’t show up on any scans. And frankly I’m not sure you’ve got much option anyway. This thing isn’t going to be going very far anytime soon.’

‘We’re not leaving. We can sort it. You should go. Thanks for your help.’ The woman waved a dismissive hand and the Wolf man gestured with his gun towards the door.

‘Oh well, suit yourselves. We might be coming back this way in a few years. We’ll drop by, see how you got on,’ Benny said as she gave a final glance around the ruined deck. She had barely taken a step towards the exit when a voice stopped her.

‘Wait. Maybe you can help.’ The man went over to her. ‘My name’s Jardin. She’s Sylana.’

‘Shut up,’ Sylana snapped.

Jardin snapped back, ‘Many hands make light work. Two heads are better than one. Etcetera. They might be able to help. Even if that does only mean evacuation.’

Benny watched the frosty exchange. ‘What about Mr Friendly here? Does he have a name?’

‘I’m Wolf,’ said Wolf.

‘Of course. It’s written all over your face. You struck me as the strong silent type.’

‘I speak when I want to.’

Benny pointed at Wolf’s face, ‘Curious choice that. You must be a wow at children’s parties. Like my old dad used to say though: “Careful what you say, careful what you do, careful what you tattoo.”’

‘Why should it bother you?’

‘My son’s half Kiloran.’

‘I won’t ask.’

‘Very wise,’ said Benny lightly. She looked at the gun ‘Maybe you could lower that now we’re

all chums?’ Wolf slowly dropped his arm.

She looked at Jardin and Sylana. ‘Right then, I get that you’re not keen to leave, so here’s the offer; I’ll have a look over your systems, help you fix them... if I can, and if I can’t, we’ll leave you alone. How’s that sound?’

Sylana stared intently at her, then nodded curtly and Jardin led Benny over to the control desk. As she passed a bulkhead panel, she ran her hand over a dark stain on the surface, rubbing what came away between her fingers.

At the controls she plonked herself into the pilot’s seat and studied the displays. Jardin talked her through the events leading up to the engine failure and his attempts to re-start them. Benny listened politely to his garbled explanations trying not to let her mounting incredulity show too much.

‘For such a big ship,’ she said lightly when he reached the end of his breathless story, ‘I’m surprised that you don’t appear to have, oh you know, an engineer, unless you’re trying to tell me that sweaty McMuscles there is one.’ Wolf glowered. ‘Surely you should have a larger crew.’

There was an uncomfortable pause before Jardin said, ‘Short staffed. Austerity measures.’

‘This particular ship’s never had more than half a dozen aboard. What’s it to you?’ Sylana demanded.

‘Just curious,’ Benny replied.

‘We’re all fully qualified,’ Sylana added.

‘In what? I mean I’m fully qualified. Well more or less fully. But I’m not sure my qualifications...’

‘Benny, isn’t this blood?’ Ruth had moved over to the panel and was peering at the dark patch which had so interested Benny.

‘Yes,’ Benny said sighing – trust Ruth to let the cat out of the bag – she dropped the façade and waved her red stained fingers in the air. ‘Yes I’m rather afraid it is.’

‘One of us was injured when the engines failed,’ Jardin said.

Benny looked at the three, appraising them in turn.

‘Really?’ she said after a pause, ‘Which one?’

Jardin tried to look nonchalant. ‘Does it matter?’ he asked.

‘Well judging by the amount of blood over here,’ Benny waved at another substantial stain by her foot, ‘whoever it was shouldn’t be standing at the moment, let alone holding a conversation, or a gun. So which of you possesses superhuman powers of recovery?’

A gun had now appeared in Sylana’s hand. ‘You really should have gone when I gave you the chance.’

‘What and miss getting into a whole heap of trouble? Oh you really don’t know me at all. So who are you and what really happened? Or shall I take a guess.’

‘Be my guest.’

‘Pirates.’

Jardin burst out laughing, ‘Pirates? Yeah, there’s a skull and crossbones tattooed on my chest.’

‘Oh, is there?’ said Ruth, more excitedly than she had intended.

‘No,’ he replied and drew his gun.

Benny stood. ‘Just thieves then. Hijackers. Stowed away. Took the crew by surprise. Crew locked away...’ She noticed a look pass between Sylana and Jardin and her face hardened. ‘Or dead. Including the ship’s janitor I assume. Hence the blood still being here.’

‘Something like that. The details don’t matter. What does matter is your qualifications.’

‘My qualifications really won’t help you.’ Benny replied.

‘I think they will,’ Sylana said nodding to Wolf who grabbed hold of Ruth.

Benny raised a warning hand. ‘Threatening me is par for the course, threatening my friend is a really really bad idea.’

‘But probably quite effective,’ Sylana smiled.

‘Just tell her what you’re qualified to do,’ Jardin said. Benny stayed silent. ‘Okay. Ruth, you tell us.’

‘I’m studying history and she’s an archaeologist.’

Jardin rounded on her, ‘Are you taking the piss?’

‘Listen,’ Benny said sensing things could boil over very soon, ‘I’m pretty certain I know more about how to get this thing going than any of you. But nothing will happen with a gun to Ruth’s head. We just need to be... nice to each other.’

‘Wolf will take care of her while you help us out,’ Sylana assured her. Wolf released his grip on Ruth.

‘Right. Assuming that I do help, indulge my curiosity: What could possibly be on board an old crate like this to interest...’

‘The door,’ Ruth chipped in.

‘The door. Of course, the door. I forgot about the door.’

‘The door?’ Sylana said trying to affect an air of indifference.

‘The door. You know. Big, solid, door. Behind the hologram. Down where we bumped into young Wolf here. I’m guessing that whatever it is you’re after is behind that door. Unless you’ve got a real craving for powdered milk or whatever it is this freighter is listed as carrying.’

‘You’ve found the door?’ Sylana said eyeing her captive rather more warily now.

‘We certainly have. And that’s not the sort of door you put on a ship like this. Not unless you’re using it to move something pretty valuable and you don’t want to make a big song and dance about it. It’s that or the janitor is really really precious about keeping the mops clean.’

‘It’s the Five Systems Bank,’ Jardin said having grown bored of the sparing. ‘This is one of their

oh-so-secret, nonexistent ships full of the galaxy's undeclared financial profits, stolen pension funds, credit fraud, you name it. All in solid form; bullion, precious metals. It's on its way to be hoarded on some remote, secure planet. We thought we might take it on a little detour.'

Benny nodded knowingly. 'Pick a nondescript freighter, install some serious security, then just slip it past the main lanes and bob's your whatsit. So how did you lot find out about it?'

Before Jardin could reply Sylana said, 'Doesn't matter. We just did. You've got a big mouth Jardin.'

'I know.' He winked. 'You should see what else I can do with it.'

'Gross,' Ruth said.

'Yes, he is isn't he? Anyway that's all besides the point. We have a ship full of bullion, and more, and I'm damned if I'm going to let us come this far and then just chuck it all away.'

'More?' Benny asked staring intently at her. 'This isn't just about oodles of boodle is it. There's something else in there?'

'Works of art and treasure. Loot. All sorts of goodies on the shipping manifest I saw. The Nine Crowns of the Kastor Vorax, the...'

'The Nine Crowns?' Benny said her voice rising, 'Wow. I mean really, wow. Their whereabouts has been a mystery for centuries. Are you telling me that they are on this ship?'

'It's what I saw.' Sylana replied.

'What are the Nine Crowns and Kastor Vorax?' Ruth asked.

'The Kastor Vorax was a fabled union of planets forged in the aftermath of a natural disaster in their system. Nine races coming together to create a millennium of peace and prosperity under a symbolic head of state: An object. The Nine Crowns. Nine interlocking crowns, one inside the other like Russian dolls, forged from the metals of every land, inlaid with gold and silver, rubies, jade, honey-stream crystal, tanzonite and the purest Requiem Pearls from Alensis. It's reputed to have been exquisite, nothing so exquisite and beautiful had ever been created before or arguably since, or so they say. It's something of an archaeologist's holy grail and one off my 'Seven Wonderful Treasures Of The Universe I Must See Before I Die' list.'

'So how come they lost it?' The student of history in Ruth was hooked.

'Oh the usual. Inevitable, uncontrollable economic breakdown, descent into civil unrest, revolution, petty wars. By the end there was nothing left of the Kastor Vorax bar a few starving, poverty stricken nomadic tribes. The legend goes that the last keeper of the crowns had to pawn them for a loaf of bread to feed his family. They were all dead by the end of the day.'

'They were poisoned?' asked Ruth.

'No,' said Benny.

Sylana butted in. 'Have you never seen people fight over a loaf of bread?'

Ruth shook her head.

'I have,' said Sylana and Benny could see she was telling the truth. 'Story over,' she added, then

lowered her gun, ‘See, I’m being nice now. Time to get us moving’

Benny and Jardin sat in the pilot seats while the others crowded behind. Benny looked things over again. ‘It seems to me your biggest issue is that many of the systems needed to restart the engines aren’t working for some reason. Virus maybe?’

Sylana prodded Jardin with her blaster. He looked at her apologetically.

‘This for example.’ Benny flicked her fingers and pulled up a program. As she tried to open it a little box popped up: ‘THIS CONTENT DOES NOT SEEM TO BE WORKING. PLEASE TRY AGAIN LATER.’

‘What we need is a new ship’s computer. Luckily, I’ve got one.’ She spoke into her wrist com, ‘Jack. Jack, are you there?’

There was an odd grunting noise from the speaker.

‘Wakey wakey Jacky-boy,’

‘Uh? What? I’m not sitting in your chair,’ Jack said. ‘What’s been going on? Are you two all right?’

‘You never said there were more of you,’ Wolf said accusingly.

‘Only Jack,’ Ruth replied, then wished she hadn’t.

‘Yes... we’re just about fine. Jack, we’re on the bridge. Ship’s computer is pretty much kaputt. Do you think you could hack into it so we can use the *Irverfield*’s systems to restart the freighter’s engines?’

‘Not the easiest cocktail to mix but I’ll give it a go. Is it wise though?’

‘Wise? No. Is it what we’re going to do? Yes.’ said Benny.

‘Okay,’ he said, ‘give me a few minutes.’

The radio went dead. The freighter’s ersatz crew stood and sat in silence and waited.

Fifteen minutes later Jack’s voice crackled back. ‘Done a better job than I thought.’

The touchscreen displays flipped several times before being replaced by those familiar to Benny from the *Irverfield*.

‘Loath to say it but he’s good that boy.’ She started operating the controls.

Jardin joined in once he’d figured out the new display. ‘Power’s building. Containment field stable. Ready to restart.’ He gave Sylana an ‘I told you this was a good idea’ wink. ‘Injecting first elements. Reaction initialised.’

Engines glowing fitfully the freighter began shakily to move.

‘Watch the speed, Jardin,’ said Benny, ‘This thing is going to have to limp to your rendezvous. No hopping, skipping or jumping.’

‘Don’t worry, it’ll be fine,’ Jardin grinned back at her.

‘I’ve heard that before,’ Sylana said eyeing him warily. ‘You take it steady this time, clear?’

Jardin ignored her. ‘Reaction is building, containment field is...’

From somewhere in the ship there came another massive explosion. The air pressure in the room dropped slightly and in the distance they all heard air-tight emergency bulkheads dropping into place.

A series of warning tell-tales started flashing on the main display as another round of klaxons began blaring.

‘Breach in the magnetic containment,’ Jardin shouted, ‘I don’t think the system can compensate.’

‘Shut down the reaction then,’ Benny yelled back.

‘I can’t, the controls are screwed.’

‘They’re not the only thing then,’ she replied turning towards the main engineering control panel. ‘If we can’t get the reaction under control and it breeches then whatever is in that room is going to get fried along with the rest of us.’

‘We are going to save this ship,’ Sylana said finally losing her cool. ‘I have not spent this long planning all this to just give it up now. And you’re going to help us.’

‘Yes I rather assumed I was. After all we fry as well if it goes. So this is as much about self-interest as anything else,’ Benny retorted.

‘Have you flown much besides a shuttle?’ Jardin asked as he sat beside her.

‘Kid, I’ve been flying since so long before you were born it makes me dizzy to think of it. How long until containment breach?’

‘Hard to say, it’s fluctuating wildly, might go in the next minute, might be a few hours off.’

‘Useful,’ she replied, scanning the displays rapidly. She ran her fingers over the controls and called up local star charts. ‘Let’s hope it’s the few hours not the next minute then. We need a close, soft place to land. I think we head there.’ She pointed at a planet a few AUs distant.

‘Where is it?’ Sylana asked looking over Benny’s shoulder as she zoomed in the display.

‘Oxyrinus,’ Benny said calling up more data on the planet. ‘Looks like there’s been some terraforming. It’s in the Goldilocks Zone of its solar system.’

‘Goldi-what?’ said Ruth.

‘The zone around a star capable of supporting life: Not too hot, not too cold, it’s just right.’

‘Still not with you with the reference.’

‘Never mind, just remind me to buy you a copy of Bedtime Stories for Beginners when we get home.’

Jardin was studying the readout. ‘It’s listed as having a breathable atmosphere. Not much in the way of land though, mostly water of one sort or another, swamps, everglades, lakes.’

Benny was thinking hard. ‘If we can eject the engine housing in space before we land, we can down the ship there and then worry about what we do next once we’re safe. Well safeish.’

‘What’s the flashing triangle mean?’ Ruth asked.

‘That? Oh nothing much. Just a warning beacon. Means ‘on no account come within a parsec of this place.’ Although it’s not too specific about why.’

‘So why are we going?’

‘Because right now it’s about our best option, in fact it’s our only option. Potential unknown danger there or definite big bang here.’

‘Can you get us there?’ Sylana asked.

‘I can but try,’ Benny replied as she coaxed the ship gently into motion. ‘If this thing doesn’t shake itself apart, if the containment field doesn’t collapse, and if we don’t crash then we’ll be fine.’

‘Until we find out why we’re not meant to go there you mean,’ Ruth said.

‘Well yes, until then.’ she threw what she hoped was a reassuring look at Ruth, ‘Right, everyone find themselves a seat, strap yourselves in and hold on. That includes you Jack,’ she bellowed into her wrist com. ‘I’m going to be flying by the seat of my pants.’

CHAPTER SIX

FILTHY LUCRE

‘The seat of my pants,’ Benny chuntered under her breath, ‘is going to be worn away at this rate.’

‘What was that?’ the driver yelled over the noise of the Sandrover as it bumped and rattled across the surface of Tugara.

‘I was just responding to your comment about the joy of living by the seat of your pants,’ she retorted.

‘I love it,’ the driver said bellowing over the roar of the engine, ‘it’s just so... raw.’

‘Yeah,’ Benny shouted back, ‘like the seat of my pants. Couldn’t we have landed just a bit closer? Or found a slightly less bumpy route?’

‘Standing instructions, we’re not allowed within the exclusion perimeter. Mr Yarryl won’t risk any damage to the site.’ They hit another rock and bounced and clattered over it, Benny grabbed hold of the frame of the vehicle to stop herself being flung out. ‘And this is the less bumpy route?’

The driver nodded and let out a whoop of glee.

‘So how long have you been working for Adam?’ Benny asked through gritted teeth.

‘About eight seasons now. How long have you known him?’

‘We only met yesterday.’

Glancing back over her shoulder she laughed loudly. ‘You’re a fast one.’

Normally Benny would come back at that, but she let it go, the dull ache behind her eyes and her somersault-turning stomach told her that her companion might have a point. The hangover remedy was helping; the journey wasn’t. After a few more bangs and rattles she asked ‘What’s he like to work for?’

‘Great. He just lets us get on with our work. Which is what you want from a rich boss isn’t it? It’s Vassari who runs the dig. Yarryl supplies the money and the enthusiasm but he doesn’t get directly involved in the work.’

‘If only they were all like that eh?’ Benny said. The driver nodded. ‘What was your name again?’

‘Gerrant,’ she said, ‘Gerrant Arnoir.’

‘Well it’s a pleasure to meet you Ms Arnoir. Is it much farther?’ She felt her teeth clattering together as they rattled over a series of ridges. ‘I’m not sure my dental work can take a great deal more of this.’

‘Nearly there,’ she said and whooped again as the rover bounced over another, rock strewn rise. Benny was beginning to wonder if she was doing it deliberately, but Gerrant was so clearly enjoying herself that it seemed a shame to spoil her fun. Mind you, Benny reflected, she probably wouldn’t find being thrown up all over much fun, and that was increasingly likely.

‘We don’t get a huge number of visitors, and we don’t get off-site very often. I enjoy the chance to take this thing out for a spin,’ she explained almost as if she’d read Benny’s thoughts.

‘Well I’m relieved one of us is enjoying ourselves,’ Benny said gripping on a little tighter.

‘Why?’ she yelled back, ‘Aren’t you?’

‘In general, yes, I’m having a blast, even if I am feeling a bit... heavy eyed. This is the first site I’ve visited, but I’ve watched recordings of others that Adam left me this morning before he had to dash off. There’s some amazing work being done, often in very challenging conditions. I’m agog with admiration.’

‘I’m pleased to hear it. Which struck you most?’

‘Ursura 3,’ she said thinking back to the recordings, ‘The work on the city there looks astonishing. I’ve never seen so many archaeologists in one place, and the remains they have uncovered are breathtaking. All the more so as no one had a clue the place even existed until a few years ago. Just wish I could see the real thing’

‘I know,’ Gerrant replied, ‘I did some of the prelim work there. It looked nothing to start with, then it just kept getting bigger and bigger and older and more remarkable with each day. I was so torn about leaving it to come here, but I don’t regret it for a minute.’

‘Why? What have you found here?’

‘Oh that would be spoiling it. You’ve got to see this one for yourself.’

‘If my eyes are still capable of focussing,’ Benny sighed.

Tugara’s distant sun cast a strange deep orange light through the thick haze of the atmosphere giving the landscape an oddly over-contrasted aspect. The heavy shadows made everything appear larger than it really was, it also made it all the more difficult to judge distances. As they rounded the corner of another of the massive dunes which snaked across the plane, Benny looked up to see a line of low hills curving out before them. Atop the nearest were a series of ruins which were, even allowing for the weird lighting, clearly massive.

‘Okay, I’m impressed,’ she said.

‘Thought you might be. There’s where we’re headed.’ Gerrant took a hand off the wheel to point to the foot of the hills.

Benny could make out a series of huts and temporary cabins clustered at the base of the hill.

‘Mission control if you like,’ Gerrant said swinging the rover to point straight at it and opening up the throttle. They shot forward but on mercifully smoother ground. A few minutes later they were drawing close to the camp. As with all of the digs supported by Yarryl this one was remarkably well provided for. The cabins certainly weren’t new, but they were well maintained and in good condition.

Benny saw three people appear from one and head towards them as they pulled up. As they stepped out of the shadow of the building she realised that one of them was Yarryl himself.

‘Adam,’ she shouted leaping out of her seat rather more athletically than she might have imagined possible, considering her fragile state.

‘Benny,’ he moved towards her, arms outstretched. ‘Gerrant hasn’t bounced you to pieces then?’

‘No,’ she laughed, ‘although she’s had a damn good go at it.’

‘She enjoys himself just a little too much in that thing. Don’t you?’ he said turning to Arnoir.

‘What can I say?’ Gerrant replied, ‘I have a need for speed.’

‘And I have a passion for a cushion,’ Benny said, rubbing her backside, ‘But thank you anyway. It was good of you to come and pick me up.’

‘I need to get on with some stuff,’ Gerrant said shaking her by the hand, ‘No doubt catch you later.’

‘Sure,’ Benny nodded as Gerrant walked away.

Adam stepped forward and before Benny quite knew what was going on had swept her up in a massive bear-hug. ‘Come here,’ he said, swinging her around. ‘It is so good to see you. Sorry I couldn’t hang around for you earlier. Business I’m afraid. Got to make the money to fund all this after all.’

She returned the hug, slightly surprised but mostly rather pleased at the warmth of the welcome. Although, she reflected, they had hit it off remarkably well from what she could remember of last night, which was not actually all that much.

‘Gosh is it me or has it just got a lot warmer?’ she said. She glanced around at the other faces watching her. ‘Ah. It is me then.’

‘So what do you think?’ Adam asked when he finally stepped back.

‘Oh that was lovely,’ Benny replied. She stopped. ‘You didn’t mean the hug did you?’ She felt herself blushing an even deeper shade of red. ‘Pull yourself together Summerfield,’ she muttered under her breath. ‘I’ve been having an amazing time thank you,’ she said, ‘You’re doing some amazing work. Just amazing. That dig on Ursura 3 is just amazing. I’m saying ‘amazing’ a little too much aren’t I? And I should probably let go of your hand at some stage.’

‘I can live with it,’ Adam laughed. ‘Come on and I’ll show you something else amazing.’

Benny made to speak, thought better of it and gestured for him to lead the way.

This is ridiculous, she thought, I’m behaving like a love-sick teenager, and I didn’t even do that when I was a teenager. It’s not, she thought, as if I don’t know where all this falling in love business leads. Been there, done that, got the scars to prove it. So not about to do it again in a hurry. Oh dear me no.

In the midst of giving herself a good ticking off she realised that she had completely lost track of what Adam was saying.

‘...bit steep but I promise you worth it,’ he said as he set off along a path next to one of the cabins.

‘Well money isn’t everything,’ she heard herself say, then saw the path up the hill and decided that she might be better off keeping quiet for the next few minutes.

Adam was right, on both counts. The path up the hill was indeed steep; rocky and covered in only the most meagre vegetation, but it also turned out to be more than worth it. They scrambled together up the last few metres and emerged on to the edge of a vast plateau where they stopped to look briefly at the view across the rocky, scrub-filled desert below. Dominating the horizon was the vast sprawl

of a Yarryl's factory; a collection of silver and white industrial buildings and huge chimneys belching out thick, streaming clouds. Adam pointed over Benny's shoulder and she turned to stare at the towering remains of a fortress, perched at the upper end of the hill. Crumbling turrets, walls and ramparts reached high into the sky and despite its ruinous state it was surprisingly intact and although many of the buildings had lost their upper stories, enough remained to show how high it had once risen.

Benny whistled in appreciation and set off towards it but Adam stayed her.

'Not there, not yet. We've dug the castle a number of times. I'm so glad you're eager to see it, but I'm sure you'd tell me off if I didn't show you this first. Over here.'

Benny turned in the direction he indicated and only then did she notice the large circular tent off to her left. She still found it difficult to judge distances in the murky light and was surprised at both how far away it was and how big it turned out to be.

Inside, she saw a series of sizeable, rectangular trenches had been dug forming a wide arc: nine in total evenly spaced with another three marked out, waiting to be excavated to complete the circle. Each trench was cut deep through a thick layer of soil that had built up over thousands of years. Due to the depth, a step had been dug around the sides of each of the holes for safety. A group of archaeologists was clustered round what looked like the most recent of the trenches and one of their number rose and moved to greet them as they approached.

'Mr Yarryl,' he said holding his hand out. 'Good to see you again.'

'How's it coming along Shima?' Adam asked returning the gesture.

'You're timing is superb, we're just about to uncover the ninth.'

'Oh, good,' Adam said.

'The ninth what?' Benny asked.

'I'm so sorry,' Adam said, 'forgetting my manners. Professor Bernice, 'Benny', Summerfield, noted archaeologist, allow me to present Shima Vassari, noted archaeologist.'

'Pleasure,' Vassari said shaking her warmly by the hand.

'Likewise,' Benny replied, 'I read some of your reports this morning, impressive work.'

'I'm flattered,' he replied, 'I know something of your reputation also.'

'Not too much I hope.'

'Only the good parts I'm sure.'

'So,' she said peering past him towards the excavation, 'the ninth what?'

'Ah yes,' Vassari said, 'The ninth cist. This one is...'

'Cist?' Adam interrupted.

'Simple stone lined grave common in early, primitive cultures.' Benny replied. She looked expectantly at Vassari. 'I'm now excited.'

'As are we. Each of the others has been intact and undamaged which is why we are pretty sure

this site is undisturbed.'

'That's remarkable, especially so close to something as prominent as that fortress,' Benny said.

'Indeed so,' Vassari agreed, 'It was only because I noticed the slight depressions in the ground when we were up here field walking that we were able to locate them.'

A voice called from over by the trench, 'I think we're almost there, doctor.'

Vassari eagerly led his visitors across to the dig where two of his associates were diligently scraping dirt from the surface of the cist.

'This is brilliant,' Benny enthused, 'Properly sponsored, good old fashioned digging up the past. I've really missed this.'

Vassari nodded and offered her a trowel. 'Maybe you would care to assist?'

Benny's face lit up as she took it. 'You just stop me.' She held it up like a trophy. 'Girl with a trowel – out of my way.'

She jumped down into the trench and the two diggers climbed out to make room for her. She carefully removed the last layer of dirt and stones from what turned out to be a substantial stone lid engraved with swirling symbols. Benny leant back on her haunches and wiped her brow.

'Phew and wow-ee.'

Vassari called down to her. 'The decorative work on the lids dates them to about 4,500 years ago, but carbon dating places the bodies we've found inside at considerably older. We are likely to have to make revisions to what we know of the history of this place at the rate we are going.'

'Exciting stuff.' Benny nodded at the lid. 'Would it be okay if we took this off now, so I could have a look?'

Vassari nodded and climbed down into the trench. Using a couple of crowbars they gently eased the stone aside.

'Just like all the others,' Vassari whispered.

'They've all been like this?' Benny asked, her voice also hushed.

'Yes, nine children, all mummified, all girls.'

She peered down, unable to look away from the pitifully small figure within. It was certainly child sized and shaped, lying on its left side, but the body was completely wrapped in folded, dried leaves which smelled as though they had been soaked in a scented oil as well as preserving fluids. It was as if someone had inserted a doll into a giant cigar. The wrappings were tied with hempen ropes.

Benny pulled out a knife and looked at Vassari then indicated the ropes. 'May I?'

He inclined his head briefly. 'The wrappings unfold like wings. It's why we call them the Tugaran Angels.'

Together they peeled back the layers. Inside was the mummified body of a girl around the age of twelve, her knees drawn up to her chin, arms folded, resting in a foetal position. Her neck, fingers and toes were adorned with precious metals and the leaves behind her back did indeed look like wings. Benny bent down and stroked the little girl's perfectly preserved hair, tied in a pony tail with a

ribbon of gold.

‘You poor, beautiful thing. I’m so sorry.’

‘So, disease, murder, execution or sacrifice?’ Vassari quizzed her, ‘I would value another opinion, Professor.’

‘Oh let’s call a spade a spade: Ritual murder, not ‘sacrifice’. Her necklace isn’t a necklace, it’s a garrotte, as I’m sure you’re aware.’

‘Of course. It’s gratifying to have one’s own analysis confirmed. From what we have been able to determine all the girls were just on the brink of puberty. Although this type of religious practise is common throughout the galaxy, our research cannot pin down a known system of belief. This specific form of iconography is unknown to us.’

‘Not to me,’ Benny said, ‘I’ve seen this before. Time worshipers.’

Vassari was taken aback. ‘Time Worshipers?’

Benny started to climb out of the trench. ‘Look at the grave layout. What you have here, my dear doctor, is a Clock of Children. Set at one of the most important moments of humanoid transition. Telling a particular time.’ Benny smiled up at Adam as he helped her out. ‘All praise Adolescence o’clock’.

‘That’s... that’s incredible,’ Vassari stammered.

‘It is, isn’t it? What a wonderfully warped and bonkers universe we live in.’

Benny wiped herself down, then rubbed her hands to clear the last of the dirt from them. She felt so much better after that burst of activity.

As Vassari turned his attention to supervising the removal of the body she watched thoughtfully. She started when Adam put his arm around her shoulder and saw that he was now typing text into his phone with his other hand. He’d not spoken a word since she had climbed into the trench. Then she remembered whose show this was supposed to be.

‘Sorry,’ she said. ‘I tend to get carried away... and involved. Are we off-schedule?’

‘No, it’s okay. I was miles away. I’m the one who should be apologising, and thanking you. This has certainly kept Shima guessing for a long time. I brought him in because of his expertise in this field. I thought we’d have this quickly sorted and could move on. No one else knows as much about this period, so if he couldn’t fathom it all out I didn’t know anyone else who could.’ He looked up from the keypad and stared at Vassari struggling out of the trench, then back at Benny. ‘Now I do.’

He put away his phone and clapped his hands together like a tour guide preparing to marshall his party. ‘Anyway, we don’t have too much time here and there’s still a lot more to show you.’

‘As if this isn’t enough for one day,’ Benny said still engrossed in watching the archaeologists.

‘Oh there’s so much more. We’ve an important monument to see. Come along.’

Yarryl strode off.

Benny was about to follow when she felt another hand on her arm. She looked round to see Vassari. She hadn’t realised just how short he was until that moment. He blinked up at her nervously

out of an oddly youthful face despite the lank grey hair which was smeared over the top.

He licked thin dry lips. 'Do you have a moment Professor Summerfield?'

'Benny is fine, and yes of course. I can catch Adam up.'

'Well.' He fidgeted as he spoke, pausing in between phrases to glance around. 'I thought that, well, knowing your reputation, the knowledge you've demonstrated here, I, erm, well, wanted to ask your advice on something else.'

Benny peered at him. Vassari's sudden transformation from the confident academic host to a nervous confidant had taken her by surprise.

'What's up doc?' She smiled down at him. 'Love saying that.' She noticed him frowning. 'Never mind. It will take way too long to explain. What's worrying you?' she asked kindly.

He guided her gently by the arm away from the rest of the group and over to a quiet corner of the tent where a set of tables were covered in charts, plans and other paperwork.

'Please pretend that I'm showing you some of our research work,' he said, his voice low and trembling slightly.

'You are,' Benny said looking at the plans.

'Yes, but that's not what I really brought you over here for.'

'No,' she said continuing to examine the documents, 'I rather gathered that.'

Vassari pulled one of the sheets out from under the others. 'This is a ground contour survey using optical remote sensing technology. Fairly old fashioned'

'So is a shovel,' Benny said 'Doesn't stop it being useful.'

'Quite so. Anyway, this is what we found. Just look at it.'

Benny studied the sheet closely. She could see distinct blobs, shapes and patterns in the images many of which appeared to be linked.

'Oh my,' she said, 'When was this done?'

'I had it done just after I arrived, so only a matter of a few months. As far as I could tell no one had bothered looking in the valley before.'

'Well I can't understand why, it's alive with interesting features.'

'Yes,' he agreed, 'But this tells the full story. What do you think?' he asked looking expectantly up at her.

'I think city, doctor, bloody great big stonking city.'

'I'm glad you think I'm right,' he said, nodding enthusiastically.

'It's massive. What's this?' she pointed at a large clearly delineated grey patch which seemed to cover a third of the lost city.

'That's Mr Yarryl's factory.' Vassari said, 'And that's just what's there now. It's not public knowledge yet, but there's a massive expansion plan in the pipeline which will more than double the

size of it in the next half year.'

'That would virtually obliterate the city,' Benny said, 'Surely you've told Adam about this?'

'Not yet,' he said his eyes constantly darting around.

'Why not, he'll stop the work as soon as he knows.'

'That's the problem. I was informed that a ground penetrating radar survey by orbiting satellite was not permitted for local, political reasons.' Vassari reached under the table and opened a draw. From inside he took out another large sheet and rolled it flat. The city now showed up in greater detail. There was no denying it was there.

'Okay,' Benny said, 'So you've been naughty and done one anyway.'

'No.' Vassari shook his head and pointed to the area covered by the factory. 'This one was done before the factory was built. I found it one evening when I was trawling through the archives of my predecessor here. It had been mis-filed. Deliberately I believe. From the registry indicators I believe it was done by Yarryl's own people. He knew the city was there and went ahead with the development of the factory regardless, then tried to bury the survey.'

'But this doesn't make any sense,' Benny said, 'He's nuts about this sort of stuff. Why go to all the trouble of funding all this work and then gleefully wreck another site of equal if not even greater value.'

'How well do you know Mr Yarryl?' Vassari asked his voice dropping even quieter.

'Not well. It's all been a bit of a whirlwind since yesterday.'

Vassari glanced up at her 'I'm sure it has. He's not an easy man to get to know but one hears rumours. He has his enthusiasms; I have never met anyone as knowledgable on all things military who wasn't an academic. But some say his greatest passion is for money and nothing and no one stands in the way of that. I haven't shown him my survey because I don't want to risk my job and if he knows that I know or if he thinks that my evidence could stop him expanding the factory I don't think I'd be working here, or anywhere else, for very long.'

'Oh I'm sure he's not like that,' Benny said, wincing at the forced tone in her voice. 'It does seem at odds with the man I've met. He makes money to spend it, as far as I can see, on doing good things, and not just in archaeology.'

'I know,' Vassari agreed. 'He's spent a fortune on preserving the fortress and on the work here, it seems utterly illogical to then destroy an even more major site simply in the name of profit. What's more I'm convinced that the answers to the origin of this burial ground lie in the city.'

'Look, your job's safe, I'm sure, so just tell Adam about it.'

'I know I should, but, well, one hears stories...'

'Stories? Stories, doctor, are not evidence. I prefer evidence.'

'Benny!' Yarryl's voice cut through their conversation. He had reappeared at the entrance to the tent and was waving at her, 'Come along, I thought you were right behind me,' he yelled, before exiting again.

'Coming, just another two minutes,' she shouted back. 'Look I can have a word if you like.'

‘I’d really rather you didn’t,’ Vassari said hurriedly burying the older survey plot back in the draw.

‘Okay, I won’t mention your name, but I might do a little subtle fishing. He might let slip the real and probably perfectly reasonable reason why he hasn’t looked into this.’ She tapped the side of her nose knowingly. ‘I have my ways.’

‘Please be circumspect. I think he could be a very dangerous...’

‘Benny!’ Adam had re-entered and his voice sharper now. Benny looked up. Was she imagining it or had something of the warmth gone from his face, or was that just the power of suggestion at work.

‘Sorry doc, really got to get going. My guide is getting impatient.’

‘Take this.’ Vassari quickly scribbled something on a notepad on the table, tore out the page, folded it and pressed it into her hand. ‘You might learn more.’

‘Great, thanks,’ she said, pocketing it absently, ‘I’ll take a look later. Must dash. Good luck and thank you.’

As she finished speaking she was already hurrying across the tent towards Yarryl who was waiting just outside.

‘Sorry,’ she said, ‘professional stuff.’

‘Ahh. Right. I thought you were off conspiring.’

She shot a look at him then saw his familiar reassuring grin.

‘Joking,’ he said, ‘I’m not that paranoid.’

She laughed the moment off, ‘If you’re not then you’re the first mega-rich businessperson I’ve ever met who isn’t.’

‘I didn’t say I wasn’t paranoid,’ he pointed out. ‘But I doubt I have anything to worry about with you and Shima Vassari.’

*

They walked towards the towering ruins. Benny took the chance to take in the view over the valley again. It was obvious, now she knew, that the ridges, humps and lumps she and Gerrant had driven over were the surviving footprint of a forgotten, urbanised civilisation. But what had happened to it? Famine? Plague? Flood? All of the above? Volcanic activity perhaps?

She looked at the mountains across the valley. No sign now, she thought, but then the same was true of many a dormant volcano. So it was entirely conceivable that at least in the past one of them had erupted and buried the settlement. Now the only thing belching smoke was the factory.

They reached the fortress and Adam started up a modern metal flight of steps which led to the gatehouse entrance, part way up one of the walls.

Benny followed and nearly cannoned into the back of him when he stopped dead in the doorway.

‘Always takes my breath away this,’ Yarryl said his voice hushed. ‘The power this place represents. The statement of surety and confidence. This was a people who were supreme in their power and control of the area. Imagine the battles that might have been fought round here.’

‘Is there any evidence of battle?’ Benny asked.

‘No,’ he replied with a slight sigh, ‘None. That’s what we were hoping to find. Come on, I’ll show you around.’

They walked inside, into the stark, sand covered courtyard.

‘There’s some terrific views from the remaining wall walk and towers.’

He bounded across the flagstones and made for a doorway in the southern curtain wall.

Inside the thick wall, a passageway led off to left and right. Yarryl snapped on a torch and led the way left until they reached a flight of stone stairs. Benny struggled to keep up as he jogged up them. She turned a final corner and without any warning stepped out on to the top.

‘Whooah,’ she said taking a rapid step back.

The wall walk had once had crenelated battlements, but they had long since fallen away to leave little more than a few base layers of stone, shin high at best. Thankfully, the top itself was a good three metres wide, so she and Adam could make their way along it comfortably away from the edge. She risked peeking over just once; it was a very long way down. Adam came to a stop midway along the wall and just stood, staring out, soaking up the atmosphere. He looked, Benny thought, like he was lost in his own little world, pretending to be a guard or, more likely, king of the castle.

Benny decided this was as good a time as any to wheedle some information out of him. With her hands behind her back, she sidled up to him then eased herself closer to the edge.

‘Whacking great big fortress, high up on a hill, defending... well... what do you think this place was defending?’

‘Very good question,’ Adam said, ‘A military, religious order? Your Time Worshipers, perhaps? You can see the burial site from over there,’ he added, pointing across to the other side of the walk.

‘Oh yes,’ she said, and pressed on. ‘But I can’t believe anyone would build all this just to defend a dozen graves. However important they might be. Logically there must be something down in that valley. Military encampment, trading post.’ She put a hand up to shield her eyes from the sun as she stared intently into the valley.

‘I reckon I can see a city out there.’

‘You can? Whatever makes you think that?’

‘I’m an archaeologist. I phrenologise the ground.’

Adam chuckled, ‘You read bumps, right.’ He took out a small pair of field-viewers from a pouch on his waist belt.

‘No,’ he said absently, ‘No, I don’t think you can. I can’t see the first trace of anything.’

‘What if it is out there, though?’ She persisted. ‘A whacking great big city. You wouldn’t expand the factory without excavating, surely? Protect important discoveries...’ She caught his eye then shut up and bit her lip. Adam had stiffened. His voice was scarily calm, his words precise.

‘Who gave you the idea we were considering expansion of the factory site?’

Benny swallowed hard, but was saved from the embarrassment of dropping Vassari in it by a

distant rushing sound, which soon grew to an ear piercing roar as three aircraft in attack formation zoomed overhead, so low that the down draft almost knocked them off their feet. Benny would have gone over the edge if Adam hadn't have grabbed her in time.

'Great goddess,' Benny shouted over the racket, 'Those are moving at one hell of a lick.' Shielding her eyes again she tried to descry more details.

'Are they headed...?' She didn't need to finish. Adam's head jerked in the direction of the factory as he raised the viewers to his eyes and she followed his gaze.

'Look at those,' he exclaimed with awe, 'That's the new 'Widow Maker' fighter bomber. Where did they get them from, I wonder?'

The aircraft were dark specks high in the murky sky now, making for their target. One let rip with a volley of strafing fire aimed at the factory. The second dived and released a payload of bombs. Before the second craft had finished its bombing run the third had banked and turned and fired two missiles straight into the heart of the complex. There was a series of explosions as the projectiles detonated. Benny gasped, expecting to see parts of the factory erupt into flame, but as the smoke cleared she realised that the buildings were emerging unscathed.

'Auto-defence barrier,' Yarryl shouted over the drone of the planes' engines.

'You might have warned me, I had my heart in my mouth,' Benny said. 'Who the hell are they and what do they have against your factory? No one hates vegetable chips that much.'

Adam nodded. 'The authorities dismiss it as a 'little local difficulty', but we all know there's a civil war going on. Broke out about six months after we built the factory. We've tried to stay neutral but that just means we get targeted by both sides. If you're not for us... you know?' He gestured towards the industrial plant. 'I've brought wealth, employment, food to these struggling people and that's the thanks I get...'

'Adam,' Benny interrupted him tugging at his arm, 'I hate to say this, but I don't think it's quite over yet.'

The Widow Makers were now bearing down on the fortress. The roar of the engines was deafening as they flew straight across the plane. At the last moment they climbed steeply, swung around and came at them again, this time from the opposite direction.

'What did you say?' Benny yelled over the noise. She had seen Adam's mouth moving but the words had been drowned out.

'I said that it's...' Again his words disappeared into the screaming of the engines, but this time there was another louder whistling sound over the top. Benny watched in horror as the first of the bombers launched two missiles running straight at them.

She hit the deck, knowing as she did so that it was a futile gesture. You didn't duck from two large payload missiles fired at point blank range but the instinct was too strong and she grabbed Adam's arm and dragged him down with her.

A second later the missiles detonated. There was a deafening crash and crackle of energy as they hit a forcefield and their power was dissipated across it. The discharge bifurcated repeatedly like summer lightning, forking and shimmering across the sky above them in macabrely beautiful patterns.

Benny lay on the ground looking up. ‘That would have been even more impressive if I hadn’t been lying face down in the dirt terrified out of my wits,’ she said.

Adam stood and offered his hand. ‘Sorry, I was trying to tell you it’s all right. I had a secondary shield installed to protect us here as well.’

‘And you didn’t mention this earlier because...?’ Benny asked glaring at him as she dusted herself down.

‘Slipped my mind. I rather take it for granted I’m afraid.’

‘So, this war. Why aren’t you trying to do something about it? With your money and influence you could be a peace broker. You could help stop all this.’

‘I could? Maybe I’ll try that. You really are a breath of fresh air.’

He took her in his arms and kissed her. It seemed a wholly inappropriate moment, but she didn’t stop him. She couldn’t work out what, but there was something about him that she was just falling in...

Watch it Summerfield, she told herself sharply. Not the ‘L’ word. Yet she felt comfortable, safe even, in his embrace, and even in this baking heat he still had a lovely clean smell. She liked a man who washed.

‘I’ve been here before and I don’t want to get hurt,’ she heard herself say. What the hell was going on in her head? Just say no, she told herself, that’s all I have to do. Just say no. Simple.

Adam placed a finger on her lips.

‘So have I, but I know it will be different this time.’

As they kissed again, the planes passed directly overhead and off, back towards the horizon from which they had come, strained engines screeching.

CHAPTER SEVEN

C(R)ASH

Strained engines screeching as it headed for the surface, the freighter tore through the thickly twined jungle and plunged towards a large lake. Small creatures scurried away as their homes were ripped apart and crushed by the vast ship which then added insult to injury by raining lumps of metal and plastic down on them followed by spumes of hot gasses and burning liquids.

Inside conditions weren't noticeably better. If the bridge had been a mess when they'd first boarded the ship it was, by now, a total wreck. Once they had reached orbit of Oxyrincus Benny had jettisoned the engines as she attempted to guide the freighter in for a controlled splash-down on the watery world. Moments later they had exploded and onboard it felt like someone had given the ship an almighty kick up the arse. The carefully managed descent had turned into a head-long plunge. Control systems which had been on the brink of collapse gave up the ghost and even the alarms to tell the crew that the systems were packing up had surrendered and died. What should have been a screaming cacophony of klaxons and rending metal became oddly quiet.

The ship had dived towards the planet. Jardin and Benny, grappling with navigation to try to pilot the vessel into a trajectory which might give them a faint chance of survival, had been virtually silent. The odd muttered curse through gritted teeth had been all that anyone had heard out of them. Sylana, Ruth and Wolf were sitting buckled into seats which threatened to tear themselves from their moorings at any moment and all were praying to whatever they believed in that they might, just might, live through this.

Somehow Jardin had managed to ease their angle and rate of descent. Benny had spotted the lake as they broke through the cloud and together they had aimed the dying vessel for it. At the back of her mind Benny wondered how Jack was faring. The inertial dampers of the shuttle should have protected it from the shock of the engine's detonation and so long as it remained firmly clamped to the hull it was safe. Even if it landed up in the water ships like that were designed to cope as well in water as they did in deep space. Although she imagined that Jack was not going to thank her for it later.

Assuming there was a later.

As they hit the tops of the first of the trees the strange quiet was dramatically shattered. The hull reverberated to the sound of a thousand plus impacts and they heard the terrible rending of metal as parts of the ship which had been held together by little more than luck and a certain degree of redundancy built into their design were finally torn apart. This was just a bit too much for the old freighter and it screamed in protest as girders bent and buckled and hull plating collapsed crushing the few remaining systems which had not already been damaged beyond repair.

Ruth's fingers were dug so firmly into the arm-rests of the seat she wasn't sure she would ever get them out again. The smell of burning was sickening enough without the pitching and yawing of the ship as it rocked ever more violently from side to side. It therefore took her a moment to realise that the rocking was growing more violent not less and as the surface of the lake loomed up in the forward windows of the bridge she finally gave in to the scream which had been building in her for the last few minutes.

She was only distantly aware of the fact that her voice was being joined by the others as she saw the entire planet turn upside down as the ship finally hit the water with a force which sent a tidal

wave racing away from them to crash minutes later into the vegetation along the shore.

Ruth stopped screaming slightly before everyone else did. The lights on the bridge had died but there was illumination enough coming in through the windows for her to see. It took her a moment to make sense of what had happened. Of course the world hadn't turned upside down: They had. At the last minute the entire ship had flipped over and landed on its back. Next to her Sylana seemed to be unconscious. Wolf was looking around probably as dazedly as she was, but Benny and Jardin were still frantically working at the controls. As her ears began to clear from the ringing and screaming which still seemed to echo in them she heard Benny's voice.

'We need to stabilise atmosphere and pressure. Close down any damaged sections...'

'They're all damaged,' Jardin cut across her.

'All right any sections which are starting to flood. We need to try to stop the ship sinking, or at least delay it. If we can seal off sections and keep the pressure up it will help.'

They worked together seemingly oblivious to the fact that they were all hanging upside down.

'We have got to stop doing this.' Ruth heard a voice say. It took her befuddled head a moment to catch up with the fact that it was her own.

'Whadyasay?' Sylana slurred at her from the adjacent chair.

'Nothing,' she replied, 'just that crashing spaceships is in danger of becoming a habit.'

Wolf released his restraints and dropped heavily to the former ceiling.

Sylana looked groggily at Ruth then shook her head and turned her attention to Benny and Jardin. 'We're in one piece then,' she said, her voice sounding thick and heavy.

'In several pieces actually,' Benny shot back at her. 'Or at least in danger of breaking up into. I have no idea how long this is going to hold together. But if our luck holds it will be long enough for us to get to the shuttle and get out of here.'

'This is our luck holding?' Ruth asked.

'You're alive aren't you?' Sylana said.

'Now, now,' Benny said, 'like I said, play nice. We are all, for whatever reason, now in this together. So we work out our best route through the ship, get to the shuttle and clear off.'

'Without the...' Sylana started.

'Yes, without the damn treasure in that damn vault,' Benny said. 'It may not have dawned on you yet but we are only in this mess because of you and your obsession with it. Right now our only concern is getting back to the shuttle in one piece before this thing sinks beneath the waves and drags us down with it. Capiche?'

'I think there are a couple of possible routes.' Jardin looked up from examining schematics on one of his displays.

Benny leaned over. 'They don't look too promising to me. A number of breaks in the hull, lots of exposed cabling, gasses venting. Nasty.'

'Well I suppose we had better get on with it,' Sylana said as she started to gingerly unbuckle

herself.

‘Actually there is another option,’ Benny said doing likewise.

‘And that would be?’ Sylana said as she swung herself down.

As the others worked Wolf helped Ruth to clamber safely down out of her seat.

She loves it when people ask,’ Ruth said, ‘gives her a chance to be all clever and “I’ve got a plan”-ish.’

‘I do indeed,’ Benny said dusting herself down as she too dropped gently onto the new floor. ‘We can pop out of one of the inspection hatches and just walk along the hull. Breathable atmosphere if a little damp, and much much safer than trying to get through the ship.’

‘Makes sense,’ said Jardin. ‘There’s a hatch just down the main transom.’

Ruth looked over at Wolf. ‘Are you all right?’ she asked him.

He looked over at her, his face blank but his eyes seemed troubled.

‘Fine,’ he said, ‘Just trying to remember something.’

‘What?’ she said.

‘If I knew that...’ he said.

‘Oh yes. Any idea what it might be?’

‘Something about the name of this place. Oxyrinus. It’s familiar.’

‘Come along you two,’ Benny called from the entrance to the flight deck. Her com bleeped. ‘Is everyone all right down there?’ Jack’s voice sounded a little slurred.

‘Yeah, we’re fine, sorry, should have called in, are you okay?’

‘Bit shaken but not stirred. Although there’s something funny happening to the systems here,’ he said.

‘Funny?’ Benny asked.

‘Yeah, not entirely sure what. Few odd responses. Could just be that things got a bit messed up when you decided to take us on a roller-coaster ride. I’ll check it and get back to you. Out.’

Before Benny could enquire further the com cut off.

The others had already disappeared past her through the door and she set off in pursuit.

‘It’ll come to you,’ Ruth was saying to Wolf who smiled back at her. If he meant it to be reassuring it had quite the opposite effect. There was something hungry about it and she began to understand why he was called Wolf.

Benny joined the others in the dimly little tunnel. The lights flickered intermittently and a smell of burning metal and plastic filled the air.

‘The sooner we’re out of this the better,’ Benny said, ‘I don’t imagine any of it will be doing us much good. So lead the way Mr Jardin.’

‘It’s just Jardin,’ he said and stomped off.

‘What’s up with him?’ she asked Sylana.

‘He likes to fancy himself as leadership material, doesn’t respond well to being told what to do,’ she explained.

‘Oh right. One of those. I can relate,’ Benny said and set off after him.

It only took them a few minutes to reach the hatch and a few minutes more of struggling with the damaged mechanism to get it open. Warm muggy air flooded in along with a fine drizzle. One by one they hauled themselves out onto the scared surface of the hull.

Except Wolf. Jardin went back and looked down the hatch. Wolf was staring into the middle distance at the bottom of the ladder, repeating the word ‘Oxyrinus’ over and over to himself. He jumped at Jardin’s voice, ‘Come on, man, wake up!’

CHAPTER EIGHT

DEPOSIT BOX

Wake up!

Benny woke. There was an alarm clock ringing.

Ow!

No, there wasn't. Just a thumping in her head.

Damn dehydration.

Memories of last night swum back foggily: did she really say 'Tuber Tycoon? Hot Potato more like. Phwoar!'

She opened an eye and registered her feet sticking out from under the duvet at the end of the bed. There was sand between her toes.

'I'm lying down,' said the voice in her head. 'Where am I lying down?'

Then she noticed the hairy hand and forearm resting on her chest.

Slowly, carefully, she turned her head as gently as she could to the right and saw the peacefully sleeping face of multi-multi-billionaire Adam Yarryl snoring quietly next to her.

'Oh bugger,' she whispered to herself, 'I didn't say no.'

CHAPTER NINE

DANGER MONEY

‘No, no, no, no. This does not look good.’ Benny looked out across the vast lake. The nearest shore was some kilometres distant and the farthest was completely out of sight, between them and solid ground was a thick tangle of swampy vegetation. The air was heavy with moisture and in the distance the cries of native creatures could be heard.

‘There’s something very wrong about Oxyrincus,’ Benny said.

‘I know what you mean,’ Sylana said. ‘It’s like everything has been sort of melted together.’

‘Yes,’ Benny agreed, ‘good description. Like someone started painting the place then it rained and it all got smeared.’

Ruth nodded. The more she looked at the swamp the more unsettling it became. The colours were all wrong, the shapes malformed, even the distant cries seemed distorted and disturbing. She turned slowly to survey the rest of the lake.

‘Come on, no point dawdling.’ Benny pointed to the shuttle which was still attached to the ship at the far end of the hull. ‘Shouldn’t take us more than fifteen to twenty minutes to walk there. Try not to fall in.’

‘What’s that?’ Ruth asked pointing out into the middle of the lake.

‘It’s just a wave,’ Sylana said.

‘Yes but what’s causing it? It was completely calm a moment ago.’

‘She’s got a point you know,’ Benny said, ‘plus it’s moving awfully fast for a natural wave.’

‘This is bad,’ Wolf said from behind them.

Benny looked at him, he was backing away towards the hatch they had just emerged from.

‘What?’ she said.

‘Bad,’ he shouted, ‘very bad. I’ve remembered what this place is.’ With that he turned and ran the few paces back to the hatch and dived inside.

‘Oh thanks, thanks a bunch for that. Bad how exactly?’ Benny yelled after him.

Her question was answered a second later when the wave reached the hull and a nightmare broke from the water.

A vast creature rose above the surface. The head was that of a squid, dark eyes glittered balefully as it rose higher and higher to reveal a carapaced, lobster-like body. Water cascaded off it as it swung its head around as though sniffing the air, then it let out a hideous shrieking scream and dived back under the surface.

The waves raced towards them from the point where it had submerged but the creature was gone.

‘I’m starting to understand the warning beacon’ Benny said.

‘What the hell was that?’ Jardin’s voice was high-pitched and he was shaking.

‘Does it matter? I think Wolf had the right idea.’ Sylana said turning to follow him back inside.

‘We don’t actually know that the thing is hostile,’ Benny said.

‘Are you kidding?’ Sylana said, ‘even if it’s friendly I wouldn’t want to get anywhere near it.’

‘No, well, I suppose not,’ Benny said looking down the length of the hull, ‘It’s just that this is by far the easiest way back for us.’

‘Why don’t we discuss this back inside,’ Ruth said, looking nervously out to where the creature had been.

‘Good idea, come on,’ Benny said.

She hadn’t got more than two paces when the creature erupted from the lake once again. But this time it was right in front of them at the prow of the ship. It screamed again as its tentacles rose from the water. It was horrifying and fascinating. Even as she recoiled from it Ruth found herself wondering where the crustacean started and the cephalopod ended. Her horror only grew when she realised that below the tentacles were two clawed arms tipped with what appeared to be metal claws. Just as she noticed them the creature grabbed hold of the structure of the ship and shook it violently. Benny staggered only just regaining her balance. Ruth and Sylana grabbed hold of each other for support. Jardin fell where he stood.

‘Inside, everyone,’ Benny shouted over the incessant screeching as the creature continued to slash and tear at the hull. She dived back towards the hatch grabbing Ruth by the arm as she went. She glanced back to see Jardin still lying where he had fallen staring up in sheer terror at the beast that loomed over him. ‘Come on,’ she yelled at him. There was no response. ‘Jardin,’ Sylana bellowed, ‘move. Now!’

He shook his head and if he was saying anything his voice was lost in the screeching.

Sylana made to go back for him but Benny shoved her and Ruth into the hatch then moved towards the stricken man struggling all the time to stay upright.

Before she could reach him there was a drenching whoosh of water as a second creature rose up alongside the ship almost level with Jardin. It too began screaming and joined its fellow in grabbing hold of the ship. They started rocking it together and Benny flailed her arms about as the floor shook under their combined onslaught. She braced herself and tried to get closer to Jardin. She reached her hand out even though she was much too far away. ‘Come on, this way,’ she shouted trying to sound as calm as she could. Jardin didn’t even look at her, he just lay there frozen in terror. ‘Jardin, you need to move, come on, come towards me, take my hand, I’ll help you.’

She took another few steps closer to him, feeling the vessel rocking and pitching beneath her. ‘Look we’re both going to end up in the drink at this rate. Help me out here.’ She glanced back at the creatures and looked straight into one of the massive black eyes which seemed to fill half of its head. She saw herself reflected in its glassy surface and she suddenly felt terribly small and vulnerable. ‘You’re really not helping are you,’ she said under her breath half to the creature half to Jardin.

When she looked back Jardin had started to crawl towards her on his hands and knees.

‘That’s it,’ she said encouragingly, ‘come towards me, you can do it.’

There was another violent lurch and Benny lost her footing. Just as she fell one of the tentacles

whipped through the space where she had been standing a moment before. She turned sharply and started to back away up the hull, still holding her hand out to Jardin. ‘Come on follow me. You’re going to be...’

She never finished the sentence. a second tentacle rose from the water and grabbed Jardin by the leg. The cry he let out was one of the most pitiful things Benny had ever heard. He dangled at the end of the tentacle for a few long seconds then was tossed almost playfully aloft and went flying through the air, straight into the gaping mouth of the second creature. Rows of vicious metallic teeth tore him apart so fast it barely seemed possible, yet his scream appeared to go on long after there was nothing left of him to make the sound.

Without a moment’s hesitation Benny dived up the inclined hull and back through the hatch, only registering at the last second that Ruth had half clambered back out and Sylana was just behind her. She cannoned into them and they crashed through into the corridor. ‘Shut it, shut it now,’ she yelled as they fell in a heap at Wolf’s feet.

As he slammed the door shut there was a final frustrated scream from one of the creatures and then an almost unnerving silence.

‘What the hell was that?’ Benny asked then realised that both Ruth and Sylana had said more or less exactly the same thing.

They all looked at Wolf.

He was staring at the closed hatch as though waiting for one of the creatures to tear its way through.

‘I think we’re expecting you to answer,’ Benny said. ‘You did say that you knew what this place was.’

‘Someone I know worked for a terraforming company. One of the big three.’ Wolf spoke in short, declarative sentences, his voice rarely rising above a low rumble. ‘Told me these stories. About a failed project. Accident or sabotage. No one knew. It had all gone wrong. The systems went mad. Produced a nightmare world. Hybrids. Out of control environments. Thought he was having me on.’

‘Seems he wasn’t,’ Benny said, ‘and it would explain the warning buoy. Why didn’t you say anything?’

‘Didn’t make the connection. Thought it was a wind-up. Didn’t expect to crash into it.’

‘Fair point,’ she said, ‘and it probably wouldn’t have made much difference, it’s not like we had an abundance of planets to choose from. Or any actually.’

She looked at Ruth who had moved over to Sylana and was crouching next to her. The older woman was sitting on a collapsed girder rocking gently back and forth clutching herself around her knees. Ruth had put an arm round her and was making gentle sympathetic noises.

‘He was so stupid. Stupid jokes. Stupid ideas. Stupid games. Stupid plans. And now a stupid, pointless, bloody death.’ Sylana’s voice cracked repeatedly but no tears came. She just stared at the floor in front of her.

‘I’m so sorry,’ Benny said, ‘but we have to get moving. If those things out there are anywhere near as smart as a common cephalopod then it’s not going to take them long to work out how to open their

tinned lunch...’

Ruth shot a look at her.

‘Sorry,’ she said, raising her hands, ‘I could have put that better. Look I’m sorry about Jardin, I tried to help him.’

Sylana looked up at her, her eyes glittering dangerously, ‘Not hard enough.’

Ruth squeezed her shoulder tighter. ‘Come on, what did you expect her to do? That thing had him before Benny could get near.’

The anger faded from Sylana’s eyes, ‘I know. He froze. He was always like that in an emergency. The joker until things got tricky then utterly bloody useless. Still loved the daft idiot.’

‘I know,’ Benny smiled sympathetically at her, ‘I’ve known a few like that myself. Fact remains that we are going to have to make our way through the inside of the ship to get out of here and that is not going to be easy. I suggest we head back to the bridge and try to work out the best route from there.’

‘Agreed,’ Sylana said as she hauled herself to her feet once more.

Benny stood there dripping wet, ‘I don’t suppose you have such a thing as a towel?’

CHAPTER TEN

DEATH DUTIES

‘I don’t suppose you have such a thing as a towel? There don’t appear to be any in my room.’

Benny was down in the motel lobby addressing two bored looking female receptionists sat behind a large raised desk. Registering the irritated tone in Benny’s voice, one put down her e-reader, apologised with insincere, polite professionalism and tapped lightly on the screen before her. When Benny got back to Room 156 she found two still warm, slightly steaming, brown towels on the chair by the bed. She ran a bath. Fourteen minutes later she emerged from the bathroom with one towel wrapped around her. The other she used to vigorously dry her hair.

‘Much better,’ she said to the empty room. She looked around contemplating the shabby little dive she’d landed in. She had been, she reflected, in worse space motels, and worse than motels. But this was still a bit of a dump, nonetheless, she needed a pit stop before home. Time to think things over.

She switched on the infovision, moved over to the viewing port and looked out at the stars. She heard the background drone of the evening’s newscast without taking any of it in. For a moment she felt slightly dizzy as she stared out into the darkness. Just occasionally it was overwhelming, she reflected, contemplating just how very very tiny humans were. Then she smiled as she looked back over the last few days. It had been quite the roller-coaster ride. Tugara had been amazing, and beautiful and horrifying and, at times, hair-raising, but she had been with Adam...

Her thoughts trailed off as she leant on the window sill and stared deep into the darkness. What was it about Adam, she wondered, apart from finding out last night that he did in fact have a very fine master bedroom. She grinned wickedly to herself – he was charming and handsome, damned handsome, and had many other things to recommend him, but there was some nagging little voice which told her that there was something just not quite right. Too smooth? Too rich? Too perfect? Why could she not quite shake the feeling that there was more going on here than met the eye.

‘Why can’t I just for once meet someone plain, nice and ordinary?’ she said to her reflection in the glass. ‘Because,’ she replied, locking eyes with herself, ‘Benny old chum, that’s not how things work for you. Besides, you’d be bored stiff if you did.’

Something needled at her subconscious dragging her attention back away from deep space and into the room once more. She glanced around wondering what it was: she noted the dun-coloured walls, the clean but drab bed, ditto the solitary chair and desk, wardrobe with slightly wonky door, the clean but plain bathroom she had just used, the standard infovision/entertainment screen built into the wall... no, nothing unusual.

She froze. The towel she’d been drying her hair with slipped from her hands and fell to the floor. The infovision was showing a photo of Doctor Shima Vassari, the caption underneath read ‘BREAKING NEWS: LAUDED ARCHAEOLOGIST MURDERED’.

‘Increase volume,’ she said quietly.

‘...around midday today.’ The newsreader’s voice sounded like she was in the room with Benny. ‘Doctor Vassari had been working on a dig elsewhere on the planet and the reasons for his being in the city of Elanara are unknown. His body was found in an alley by passers-by.’

Benny felt herself sinking down onto the end of the bed as she watched a series of images flash up to accompany the report: the alley, footage of the Tugaran dig, shots of the capitol Elanara, archive footage of Vassari, the alley again, the shots repeated themselves in an endless loop.

‘Reports indicate that he had been severely mutilated, with some going so far as to suggest that a large-bladed implement had been used in the attack. Friends and colleagues have been commenting upon the news.’ The picture changed to a series of voxpops. Benny recognised a shocked looking Gerrant Arnoir.

‘None of us can believe it. We’re all totally stunned. I didn’t know the doctor was in town. It’s a terrible tragedy and my thoughts go out to his family.’

The picture returned to the newsreader.

‘The Yarryl Corporation, for whom Doctor Vassari had been working, has in the last minute issued a statement saying that Doctor Vassari was a highly valued and respected member of the team on Tugara and his loss will be felt by all.’

‘Off,’ Benny snapped. She sat for a few moments lost in thought staring at the blank screen. Then she took a sharp breath and said, ‘Private communication. Summerfield Benny to Yarryl Adam.’

She waited for a few moments while the system located Yarryl and established the connection. When his face appeared on the screen she said ‘Confirm’ The face stayed static but Adam’s voice filled the room.

‘Benny! Hi. Lovely surprise.’ he said cheerfully, ‘How’s it going? Sorry there’s no video. System is playing up at my end, although I can see you. You have lovely legs you know.’

Benny blushed in spite of herself. Then her mood sobered. ‘Adam, sorry didn’t really call for a social chat. What’s this about Doctor Vassari?’

‘Oh, you’ve heard, have you? I only found out about twenty minutes ago. Luckily, my people, when they knew, put all the proper procedures into action, like informing Shima’s family. I’ve been in transit ever since you left this morning. It’s terrible news. I’ve just put out a statement and we’ll work with the local authorities to try to find out what happened.’

‘So you don’t know what he was doing in Elanara?’ Benny asked. ‘Not something to do with the war?’

‘I shouldn’t think so,’ Adam replied.

‘He didn’t strike me as the type for hanging around seedy backstreets,’ she added.

‘No, I know what you mean. Didn’t know him that well myself but you never can tell with people. Sometimes you only find out afterwards that they’re leading entire double lives.’

‘True, I guess. Even so it seems so... incongruous.’

‘You liked him didn’t you?’

‘What do you mean by that?’

‘Nothing. Just noting how concerned you are.’

‘I liked his enthusiasm,’ she said carefully, aware that Adam could see her. ‘It would have been

nice to have had a little more time to talk...' She paused and stroked the bed cover absently.

'But horrible old me dragged you away, is that what you're trying to say?'

'No, of course not. Oh I don't really know what I'm trying to say. It's just, you know, wrong.'

'I understand. Well, we'll get to the bottom of it,' Adam said. 'Look, I need to talk to some more people about all this, find out if there's anything they haven't released in the way of details which might help us make more sense of it. Do you mind if I get back to you later?'

'Sure,' Benny said, 'keep me up to date.'

'Of course. Speak later.'

'Yeah. And thanks for the thing about the legs.'

'My pleasure.' he said and just from the tone of his voice she could picture him grinning. 'Oh, and don't forget you agreed to speak at the Corporation dinner next week, will you?' he added.

'I won't.'

The screen went blank and Benny continued to rub at the cover for a few moments more, then she stood and walked over to the table where she had left her clothes. Without paying any attention to what she was doing she pulled on her shorts.

As she did so she heard a faint rustling from one of the pockets. She stuck her hand inside and pulled out a piece of paper which had been folded over several times. It took her a moment to work out where she had got it from, then remembered Vassari placing it in her hand. She unfolded it, smoothed it flat and stared at the words written there. 'Contact FIGHTBACK'.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

SQUIDS IN!

Benny stared at the paper.

‘What is it?’

‘Plan of the freighter. Obviously,’ Sylana said, ‘I thought it might be useful.’

‘Oh yes, sorry. Right, looks like there are two viable routes to the aft section,’ she said as she studied it. ‘Although with the internal systems down there’s no way to tell whether either of them is passable. There’s a hell of a lot of detritus down there, not to mention sealed bulkheads. So I think our best bet is to split into two parties and try both routes. So if one gets stuck then at least they can come back and follow the other.’

Behind her Ruth, Sylana and Wolf stood looking fearfully out of the viewing ports. All had been quiet since they returned to the bridge and, if anything, the quiet was more unnerving than the attack had been.

‘What do you think they’re doing?’ Ruth asked, her voice hushed.

‘Who?’ Benny said, ‘You mean those things out there?’

Ruth nodded.

‘Thinking I should think,’ Benny said not looking up from the map.

‘They’re not intelligent are they?’ Ruth said.

‘They could be,’ Benny replied, raised her head and tried to look reassuring but realised she was doing a fairly poor job of it and gave up.

‘Oh come off it. Things like that just run on instinct,’ Sylana scoffed, ‘once we disappeared inside they probably just thought we had vanished. They may be big and scary but they’re dumb with it.’

‘I wouldn’t bet too much on that,’ Benny said. ‘Cephalopods test very highly for intelligence. They can solve mazes, even show rudimentary use of tools.’

‘Well they looked pretty dumb to me,’ Sylana shot back.

‘So do a lot of people I’ve met over the years, never wise to judge by appearances.’

As she spoke she saw Ruth’s head twitch. ‘What was that?’ Ruth said, her voice barely more than a whisper.

‘I didn’t hear...’

From above their heads on the ceiling that was once a floor there came the sound of clanging metal against metal followed by a loud tearing.

‘Okay I heard that,’ Benny said.

‘What do you think they’re doing?’ Ruth asked as the tearing sounds spread to the sides of the ship.

‘I don’t know and I’m not planning on popping topside again to find out. We need to get moving

before they finish whatever it is because I'm pretty sure it isn't going to do any of us any good.'

'Agreed,' Sylana said. 'We should take cutting gear. The ship was already in a pretty bad state, the crash isn't going to have improved matters any.'

'That 'crash',' Benny said, 'was a brilliantly controlled emergency landing thank you.'

'Whatever,' Sylana said. 'We still need cutting equipment. There should be some around here. Give me a hand to find it.'

She directed that last part to Ruth.

'Who died and made you boss?' Ruth snapped back, and instantly regretted it as Sylana stopped and turned back to face her.

'I'm sorry, I didn't mean... I mean I didn't think...' she said quietly, but she could see that the damage was done. The look in Sylana's eyes left Ruth in no doubt that she would dearly have loved to pummel her head against the wall. Ruth realised that the older woman was barely holding it together and despite her outward calm was dangerously close to snapping.

Without a word Sylana turned away and started hunting through storage lockers.

Ruth looked desperately at Benny and mouthed 'I'm sorry.'

Benny raised a hand in a gesture which seemed to say 'don't worry about it' but she too was watching Sylana warily. 'Okay,' she said, 'cutting equipment. Good idea. Then Ruth and I can take the leeward side transom and you and Wolf...'

'Oh no. I don't think so,' Sylana said without bothering to look round. 'I'm not having you two together. We may need each other's help to get out of this but that doesn't mean I trust you not to get to your shuttle first and just high-tail it out of here.'

'We would never do that,' Ruth protested and earned herself another deadly glare for her pains.

'And I'm meant to trust your word on that am I?' Sylana asked, her tone dripping with sarcasm. 'Anyway it doesn't matter. You're going with Wolf, and I'm going with Benny. That guarantees that one party will wait for the other doesn't it?'

'I don't suppose there's any point in my even trying to argue is there?' Benny said.

'No. None. Especially when Wolf and I still have the guns.'

'You present a persuasive argument,' Benny said. 'All right we'll do that.'

At the mention of the shuttle Benny had raised her com unit and signalled to Jack. The device beeped to indicate that it was receiving a signal but all she could hear was a loud hiss interspersed with some distorted crackling sounds.

'Is Jack okay?' Ruth asked.

'I think so. There's a carrier signal and he's responded to it but for some reason we can't hear him. Might have been damaged by all that water. Or there may be something else interfering. We might get a better signal as we get closer.'

'The floor's tilting.'

Ruth almost jumped at the sound of Wolf's voice, it had been so long since the man had spoken she had almost forgotten he was there. She looked down at her feet. 'What do you mean? We're on the water of course it's tilting.'

'No,' he said. 'I don't mean rocking. I mean tilting. Towards the prow of the ship.'

'Is it?' Benny said. 'Doesn't feel like it. Are you sure?'

'Oh yeah,' he said, 'I'm sure. It's very slight but it's moved. And it's still moving.'

They all stood for a moment, each trying to detect movement.

'I think you're right,' Benny said after a minute. 'It is very slight but it's there.'

'It's those things isn't it?' Ruth said looking at the ceiling.

'Oh I should think so,' Benny replied, 'We need to get moving. Have you found the cutting gear yet?' she asked Sylana.

'Not yet,' she said. 'A little help might help. No. Wait. Got it.' She opened a locker and picked out two large plasma cutters and various other pieces of gear and handed one lot to Wolf and stowed the rest in a bag which she slung over her shoulder.

'They're pulling us under aren't they?' Ruth said.

'Seems like it,' Benny replied. 'Maybe they've worked out that we need air and they're trying to force us out, or maybe they're just treating us like a take-away, who knows. This ship is incredibly heavy so it's going to take a while to drag us down but it does mean that sooner or later we're likely to find ourselves facing a rising tide. So let's move.'

Needing no further bidding they all exited the bridge.

'See you at the other end,' Benny said and hastily set off after Sylana who hadn't even waited to say goodbye.

'Yeah,' Ruth said, 'And be careful.'

'I will be. You too,' Benny said pointedly over her shoulder.

Ruth caught the look on her face and felt a small shiver run down her back. She turned to her left to see Wolf's massive frame already disappearing into the gloom of the passageway. Knowing she had no choice she followed.

'I know we're in a hurry but I wouldn't go rushing if I were you,' Benny said jogging a few steps to catch up with Sylana.

'Yeah, well you're not me are you?'

'For which I'm sure we're both very grateful,' Benny said. 'But I meant that these passages are hardly safe, it's very dark in here and whatever our personal feelings about each other it will be a lot easier to get out of here in one piece if we try to avoid stupid injuries.'

Sylana slowed her pace. 'Fair enough,' she said without looking round.

The farther they got from the bridge the darker the passageway became. The few lights which were still working became more intermittent and more prone to flickering and the eerie glow was

made all the more peculiar as it came upwards from the floor making their faces seem weirdly distorted and demonic. The air grew warmer and more stale and the creaks and protestations of the superstructure seemed more insistent.

‘The floor’s still tilting,’ Benny ventured after a few minutes.

‘I know,’ Sylana replied, ‘I can feel it now. I thought Wolf was imagining it but his senses are pretty good.’

‘How did you two meet?’ Benny asked, more out of the desire to fill the awkward silence than any real interest.

‘Oh this was his idea,’ Sylana said off-handedly. Benny waited for her to continue. ‘Well sort of. The germ of it anyway. I’m the mastermind,’ she added. There was another pause. ‘I’ve known Wolf for years, met him through a friend of a friend. He set up his own business when he was very young. Quite the prodigy.’

‘With that tattoo?’ Benny asked. ‘Wait, let me guess... Wolf and co? Wolves-are-us? Wolfworths!’

‘He didn’t have the tattoo then. And he wasn’t called Wolf. His real name is Mylo Shyke.’

Sylana stared at Benny as if expecting some sort of reaction. Benny stared blankly back.

‘You don’t know Milo Shyke?’

Benny shook her head.

‘You need to check out the underground social networks. He’s got the inmates of half the secure psychiatric units in the galaxy on his followers list.’

‘What are you talking about?’ Benny asked her unease growing.

‘Mylo, aka Wolf, has certain,’ Sylana hesitated as though searching for the right words, ‘secret interests. Cost him a lot of money to keep them quiet. Eventually he lost his company because of it. Everyone thought that sooner or later he’d get caught but he never has. He’s so confident now he’s become quite open about it. The name change and tattoo was a sort of “Coming Out”.’

‘What sort of “secret interests”?’ Benny demanded.

‘Oh, he’s the Big Bad Wolf with a fondness for Little Red Riding Hoods,’ Sylana said, ‘only sometimes he just goes that little bit too far.’ She passed a finger across her throat. ‘Exotic tastes, shall we say.’

Benny stopped dead in her tracks. ‘And you sent Ruth off with him?’ she asked with more than a hint of steel in her voice. ‘Without telling me any of this?’

‘If I’d told you then you certainly wouldn’t have let them go, and I needed you two separated and you with me?’

‘What? Why?’ Benny asked. ‘And more to the point is Ruth safe?’

‘Are any of us?’ the other woman replied, seemingly unconcerned by the dangerous note in her companion’s tone.

‘Some of us may have become distinctly less safe in the last few seconds.’ Benny said. ‘I will be

very very upset if any harm comes to Ruth you know. Very upset indeed.'

'She'll probably be fine. Wolf will have other things on his mind right now. Although when he gets stressed he can become a little bit unpredictable.'

'Oh this just keeps on getting better. I'm going back. I'm certainly not leaving those two alone.'

'No you're not and yes you are,' Sylana said and Benny noticed that the gun had reappeared in her hand. 'I want you with me.'

'Why?' Benny asked then immediately answered her own question. 'Oh for crying out loud, you still want to break into that vault don't you?'

'You bet your life I do. I've spent years planning this and it may not have worked out quite as I had intended but that doesn't mean I'm going to go home empty handed. That shuttle of yours can at least take something along to make our troubles worth while even if we can't get the whole lot. After all we don't need Jardin's share now.' Her voice was suddenly much quieter.

'Seems I don't have much option,' Benny said, 'But we get to the shuttle and we get the hell out of here. I'm not interested in the contents of the vault or in risking any of our lives any further because of it.'

'You're not interested in the Nine Crowns? Oh come off it,' Sylana said looking Benny in the eye for the first time since Jardin had died, 'I could see it in you. The same thing which drove all of us. When I told you about it I saw desire. It may not be for the money but you want that thing just as much as we want the rest of it.'

'Oh I'll admit I'd love to be the one who found the Nine Crowns, and I'll admit that it would be worth a hell of a lot of money and that's no small thought, but if I've learned one thing it's that some things just aren't worth the pain and risk.'

'Well this one is. I need that money and I intend to get it.'

They were still picking their way carefully round and over beams and across panels which had never been designed to take human weight.

Without warning Benny grabbed Sylana's arm and stayed her. 'Hold on,' she said. 'What's that?'

Up ahead the metal work seemed to be glowing faintly and there was a crackling in the air and a smell like ozone.

The ship creaked again and lurched slightly. The two nearly lost their balance and there was a shower of sparks up ahead and the corridor became enmeshed in a cascade of electrical discharge.

'Get back,' Sylana said throwing the two of them away from the arcing metalwork.

They lay looking at the corridor ahead of them which had instantly become an impenetrable curtain of sparks and lightning.

'Well that's put paid to that,' Benny said when she got her breath back. 'We'll have to go back and follow the others.'

'Yes, I guess you're right,' Sylana said. Then from behind them came another sound, this time of tearing metal and accompanying it the screaming, screeching roar of one of the sea creatures.

‘On second thoughts,’ Benny said, looking warily back down the now perceptibly tilting corridor, ‘perhaps we should try to find a way around first.’

*

Outside the ship the two creatures continued attacking the metal of the hull trying to open a hole large enough to get through. In the distance others of their kind were massing and moving steadily towards them. The creatures at the ship noted the gathering swarm and redoubled their efforts.

*

Ruth picked her way carefully across the unfamiliar shapes of the floor. She hadn’t really paid any attention to the ceiling of the freighter until she found herself walking on it. Who would? she reflected. Only now did she realise just how difficult it was picking your way through girders and cabling and pipework and any number of other things which, when above your head were a matter of total disinterest and when under your feet became a dangerous obstacle course.

It didn’t help that many of the pipes were hot and, from the sparking noises she could hear, she strongly suspected that a number of the cables were also live or at least shorting out. It had never occurred to the ship’s designers and builders that anyone would try to use the ceiling as a walkway and it showed.

She put her foot down tentatively between two more pipes and the surface give way beneath her. She let out a short yelp as her foot scraped against some sharp metal. At the same moment she heard Wolf do something similar, although his cry featured a number of choice expletives.

‘Are you okay?’ she said.

‘I just missed my footing.’

‘Same here. This was never really meant to be walked on was it?’

‘No. Watch where you’re going.’

‘And you.’

They guardedly worked their way along, ever more aware of the growing slant of the passageway as the ship continued its slow subsumption.

‘How long do you think we’ve got?’ Ruth asked, without actually expecting an answer.

‘Depends,’ Wolf replied.

‘On?’ she asked.

‘Lots of things,’ he said.

‘You’re not really getting into this conversation are you?’ Ruth said.

‘I’m not a talker.’

‘No kidding.’

He stopped and turned to look at her.

‘I’m more of a do-er,’ he said. As he spoke he looked her up and down very slowly. Ruth tried to

look him straight in the eye but found she couldn't.

She almost took a step back but stopped herself. Showing weakness would not be a good idea with this man, she decided.

The lights in their section of the transom flickered several times and grew dimmer. Terrific, Ruth thought, stuck with a man who suddenly looked like he fancied her as a light snack and now it was getting darker. Could this get any worse?

From behind her she heard metal rending and the roars and shriek of one of the creatures as it got a little closer to its next meal.

'It turns out it can,' she said. Wolf didn't appear to have heard.

*

The swarm reached the ship, more claws grabbed at the hull. Seemingly knowing what to do with no apparent communication between them they latched claws and tentacles to the metalwork and began dragging it slowly down into the water. Inch by inch the hull started to submerge.

*

'How about this?' Benny asked pointing to one of the doors into a cargo pod. 'We get in there, try to go round and then hope there's a way out the other side. These things usually have two ways in don't they? And if not we can always try and cut our way out.'

'Might work,' Sylana said. 'But we need to get the door open first.'

Benny looked up, the 'top' of the door was some distance from what was once the ceiling, so they were going to have to clamber up to access it and since the power to open the door had almost certainly long-since failed so they would need to do it manually.

'It's not going to be easy. I'll try the controls first but I don't hold out much hope. There must be a manual by-pass.' As she spoke Benny was hauling herself up to the control panel. She thumped the door release. There was a hiss and the doors parted very slightly but then stopped almost as soon as they had started to move.

'I think that's as far as we're going to get with that,' Benny said but thumped the control again a couple of times just in case.

'The manual system is up there,' Sylana said, pointing to a device which was once just at floor level but was now a long way above their heads.

'Terrific,' Benny said looking up at it. 'I'm guessing I have to lever it open,' she said peering through the gloom at the diagram which showed how to use the by-pass mechanism. 'It's a sort of pump action thing,' she reported back. 'I'll give it a go.'

Benny hung on with one arm, trying to brace herself as best she could. Then she grasped the heavy metal bar embedded into the wall and pulled it out at 90-degrees and began to yank it back and forth, feeling the pressure slowly building as she did. With each compression the door opened further but only by a tiny fraction.

'This could take some time,' she said already starting to sound slightly breathless. 'Why do they

have to make these cargo pod doors so heavy?’

Sylana started to speak but Benny cut her off.

‘Rhetorical question,’ she said, ‘But I’ve got a better one. You said you needed the money. What for?’ Benny asked. ‘I’m really hoping it’s not just because you want a nicer apartment or more shoes, that would be very disappointing. Not to mention dull.’

‘No, it’s not that,’ Sylana replied. ‘Well obviously that would be nice, but no that’s not what it’s about.’

‘Go on then, I’m all ears.’

‘Debts,’ she said simply.

‘Debts?’ Benny queried. ‘We all have debts. Well most of us at least. We don’t all go hijacking bullion shipments to pay them off. Those must be some pretty fearsome debts.’

‘They are,’ Sylana said, ‘but they’re not mine.’

‘Whose then?’ Benny gasped out.

‘Partly my mother’s, partly Jardin’s.’

‘Let me guess,’ Benny said through ever more firmly gritted teeth. ‘Gambling.’

The resistance on the hydraulic mechanism was rising with each compression, and it felt like it was rising by an order of magnitude although she knew that it was at least in part down to muscle fatigue and the strain of having to hang up near the ceiling and pump at an awkward angle.

‘In Jardin’s case it was,’ she said, ‘He just couldn’t help himself. He’d bet on the sun rising. If he saw odds he had to try them. Stupid thing was he knew what odds meant. He was a bloody statistician, or at least he trained as one. Didn’t stop him.’

‘Nurses smoke,’ Benny said.

‘What?’

‘Nurses smoke. Take drugs. Over-eat. And they should know the risks. Doesn’t stop them. Human nature.’ Benny’s sentences were becoming ever shorter and more breathless.

‘I suppose,’ Sylana said peering up into the gloom. ‘Do you want me to come and have a go?’

‘Nearly there,’ Benny grunted.

‘Well Jardin’s were gambling, but my mothers’ were business ones. She was a brilliant woman in many ways. Amazing engineer. Could make machines sing she could. Just rubbish at business. Wrong choices, stupid decisions, and a terrible judge of character so she was forever trusting people who made lots of money out of her then ran off with the takings.’

‘Often the way,’ Benny grunted in acknowledgement.

‘So now they are living in some shabby little dive and I’ve spent the last five years trying to support them and me. Oh and Jardin.’

She paused as with a loud clunk the door opened. Not fully but wide enough for both of them to get through. Benny gave a weak whoop of triumph and climbed down. She leaned against the wall and

massaged her aching arm.

Sylana said, 'Come on we need to keep moving.'

'Give me a second,' Benny said and took a few deep breaths. 'How did you come up with this little scheme then?'

'I was working for one of the five-system banks. Nothing special, just admin, pittance of a wage. There were these persistent rumours, you know, about how the banks moved their money around. It was all a bit mysterious. Lots of stories about how they did it, but no-one actually seemed to know. I made it my job to find out.'

'What, you just decided to hijack a freighter, get rid of...' a thought struck her. 'Come to think of it what did you do with the crew?'

'There were only six of them. It was deliberately kept low key.'

'You didn't answer my question,' Benny said peering intently at Sylana in the flickering light trying to read her expression.

'We put them out of the airlock.'

Benny blinked. 'What?'

'Most of them were pretty seriously injured anyway. We couldn't afford to have any witnesses. Jardin wasn't happy with it but I said it was necessary.'

'You threw them out of the airlock? In cold blood?' Benny gaped.

'Most of them were half-dead anyway.'

'Oh, that's all right then.'

'It was necessary,' Sylana repeated.

'Necessary?' Benny said incredulously. 'Since when is murder necessary? What the hell is wrong with you?'

'Wrong? What do you mean wrong?' Sylana looked genuinely non-plussed. 'We had a plan and part of it was no witnesses. It was the most efficient way of doing it.'

'Are you some sort of socio...' she stopped herself.

'Sociopath?' Sylana asked. 'That's what the experts said. I don't see it myself. I'm just clear-headed. I see what needs to be done and do it.'

Benny looked at her with a mixture of horror and pity and began to wonder if perhaps Ruth wasn't better off with Wolf after all.

'Come on,' Sylana said climbing up towards the opened door. 'We're losing time.'

Behind them the creatures let forth another howling chorus of screams and shrieks and Benny could have sworn they sounded closer this time.

*

The hole in the hull was now large enough for one of the beasts to squeeze its head through, it worked

its way inside and peered around, allowing its tentacles to wander across the unfamiliar shapes and materials of the ship. Retreating it set to work again to enlarge the opening as its fellows continued to drag the ship down.

*

Ruth grasped another piece of metal and hauled herself higher up the mountain of twisted gantries and stanchions which blocked their path. Wolf was hoping that there might be room to squeeze through if they climbed the blockage, but he hadn't sounded optimistic and it was looking like they were going to have to try to cut their way through.

'I think this is the best place,' Wolf said as he steadied himself and peered through the tangle of wreckage. 'I can see through here. Won't take too long to cut through. I'll pass the pieces to you.'

'What am I meant to do with them?'

'Drop them. Just that if I drop them I might hit you on the head.'

'Right. Yes. Sorry. Stupid of me.'

The ship lurched. Everything in the mound of metal shifted and Ruth felt her fingers slipping off the artificial mountain. She flailed around trying to retain her grip bashing and scraping her arms and fingers against jagged and torn edges. Above her Wolf wasn't faring much better. He swore as he lost his grip and slid back down towards her. Somehow he managed to anchor himself to a jutting pipe and reached down to grab Ruth just as she finally lost her hold and started to tumble.

She yelped with pain as she felt her arm being nearly wrenched out of its socket as the big man grabbed her, but at least it had arrested her fall. She glanced back down and only then realised how high they were. The transom was some five metres from floor to ceiling and dangling above it in mid-air that suddenly seemed like a very long drop.

Wolf swung her back to safety as the ship settled down. It was clearly tilting much more steeply now, and in the distance Ruth thought she could hear the sloshing of water echoing up from the dark of the tunnel.

She turned herself round so she was facing back into the debris then gave herself a quick once-over to check for any serious damage. Satisfied that she was in one piece she murmured a grateful 'Thanks.' up at Wolf.

'Sure,' he said then turned back to examining the obstruction as though nothing had happened.

'Well that didn't help,' he said after a few moments of peering and prodding. 'I saw a light through it a moment ago. Gone now.'

'Can we still get through?' she asked.

'We can try,' he said and hefted the large cutters out of his backpack and started working away at the nearest girder. Every time he moved Ruth could feel the structure shift and resettle beneath her. She worked hard at stopping herself from whimpering.

'How long have you known the others?' she asked by way of a distraction.

'A while,' he said as he pulled a large chunk of metal out and handed it down to her.

‘How long is ‘a while’?’ She tried again as she took the proffered lump only to find that Wolf had made it look a great deal lighter than it really was.

‘I worked with Sylana on a few things. Known her on and off a few years and Jardin was always part of the Sylana Shakhar package.’

‘So whose idea was this then?’ Ruth asked as she hefted another chunk down onto the floor trying not to cut her fingers to shreds in the process.

‘Little bit mine. Mostly Sylana. She’s a dark one.’

‘Dark? How?’

‘Distant. Never know what she’s thinking. Can be really sweet and funny then can do really... you know... dark things.’

‘Dark things?’ Ruth asked starting to feel an edge of fear catch on her.

‘Sort of cold blooded. I’m no angel. Not by a long way. But I couldn’t do the things she’s done.’ He paused. ‘Maybe that’s why I like her.’

Ruth shivered. There was another slight lurch but this time her grip was firm.

‘How long do you think we’ve got?’ she said looking back over her shoulder down the passage. It seemed to be darker every time she looked. Then she realised that it was darker, the lights further down had failed and the noise of water sloshing around had definitely grown louder.

‘Scratch that. More important question: Do you think those things can move about out of the water?’

‘Let’s hope not,’ he replied. But he redoubled his efforts nonetheless.

*

The hole was nearly twice as large now and two of the creatures had managed to force their way inside, but their progress was constrained by the depth of water within the ship. Patiently they waited their cold black eyes staring into the darkness ahead as their fellows continued the pull the huge structure deeper into the lake and the water rose slowly but steadily around them.

*

Benny was balanced between two large and decidedly wobbly containers. Crossing the cargo pod had turned out to be like making their way through a gigantic novelty fun house. The massive storage drums and crates had been tossed around in the crash and now lay in great piles around them, some balanced precariously, some wedged firmly in place, almost all at crazy angles.

‘I think it’s okay over this way?’ she called testing her footing as she moved hoping that the wobble didn’t translate into an avalanche of containers when she put her full weight on it. ‘I wonder if they’re aquatic or amphibious?’ she said, unconsciously echoing Ruth’s query.

‘Does it matter?’ Sylana asked as she clambered up another plastic slope using the ridges as handholds.

‘It might. If they can function out of the water then they don’t need to wait for the ship to flood to

come and get us.'

'Thanks for that thought,' Sylana said. 'You're not exactly cheering me up.'

'I wasn't trying to,' Benny said. She still couldn't quite believe the sheer coldness of her companion, but then equally you couldn't blame someone for being sociopathic, it was as much nature as nurture. She shook her head, this was really neither the time nor place for an internal philosophical debate she decided, that was something she could indulge in when they were safely back on the shuttle.

With a start she realised that she had not even thought about the shuttle or indeed about Jack since they set off. She wondered if he was okay and pressed her wrist com, 'Jack? Jack? You okay? You hearing me?'

There was only the buzzing and static.

'Anything?'" Sylana asked.

'Still can't tell whether it's damaged or there's interference.'

'Well then leave it.'

'I just want to make sure he's okay.'

'It's not as if you can do anything either way is it?'

*

Physically Jack was fine, although still shaken up from the crash. After Benny and Ruth had left he had poured himself a drink, a large one, had a snack and then settled down to wait. It was, he had reflected, a very comfortable vessel indeed.

He had been woken some time later by Benny's call. Groggily he had tried to remember first where he was, then who he was, then what was going on. He had then spent fifteen minutes hooking the ship's controls into those of the freighter after which it had all gone quiet again. Once more he had nodded off.

He had awoken to see a planet racing towards them, a series of minor explosions blasting lumps off the freighter, and a bright glare as the ship's ejected engine core had exploded somewhere off to the side. The percussion from the explosion had sent the vessel hurtling even faster towards the watery planet below. at which point he had blacked out again.

He had no idea how long he had been unconscious but he woke to find all systems seemingly registering normal but the lighting was way too bright and the gravity felt weird. It took him a moment to register that the light was coming through the windows and the gravity was a combination of the ship's own and the planet's. Then he realised what the problem was; he and the freighter were upside down, the shuttle's artificial gravity working hard to overcome that of the planet.

He ran a quick check to determine that other than being bruised and shaken up with a headache that could probably be heard at the other end of the freighter he and the shuttle seemed to have survived pretty much intact. The freighter had taken the brunt of the impact.

While his brain tried to make sense of all that he had climbed down from his seat to check that the seal on the docking port was still intact.

Had he not done so he might have seen Benny and the rest emerge onto the hull of the ship and their subsequent and fatal encounter with some of the planet's pseudo-native fauna, but by the time he returned the flight deck they had all disappeared again.

He sat down again at the flight controls and ran a scan through all local frequencies to see if he could pick up any transmissions. There was a uniform lack of response across the board. He tried ship to ship but still there was nothing.

A few minutes later the com had bleeped but when he tried to respond all he got was static and a few distorted crackling noises.

‘Hello, hello hello,’ he said as much to break the silence as in any real hope of a reply. ‘Is there anybody out there?’

Abandoning the attempt he decided to pursue other lines of enquiry.

‘So where the hell are we?’ he said running his hands over the controls using the flight recording systems to work out their location. Eventually the system told him they were on Oxyrincus, so he looked that up in the ship's database. He scanned through the scant information growing more and more alarmed as he read the brief and disastrous history of the attempted terraforming. It appeared to be a catalogue of human error followed by rapid abandonment and then collective hand-washing.

‘Not good,’ he muttered to himself, ‘not good at all. Come on Benny, where are you?’

He sat for a few minutes pondering what to do next. His options, he decided, we're essentially: go out after Benny and Ruth, with the risks that entailed (he sat counting them off on his fingers: getting injured, not knowing who else was on the ship, missing them... he stopped, deciding that was enough) or stay put and try to contact them.

‘Nothing on the comms...’ he said as he scanned rapidly through again, ‘wonder if I can hook back into the ship's systems... Maybe...’ his fingers danced around, ‘Erm... No... Ahh... Got it’ With a final flourish he re-established a link to the freighter's damaged computer control. The system was clearly even more seriously corrupted than before, the link flakey and the data he was getting through fragmentary but from what he could tell life support was still more or less functioning and basic systems were operative.

He tried hooking into the internal ship's address system. A security protocol blocked his progress. Hurriedly working his way around it he found another gate blocking his path, he opened that too smiling at his own cleverness.

‘Well that was easy,’ he said.

‘Well that was easy.’ His own voice came echoing back at him from the computer.

‘What?’ he said looking up, startled.

‘What?’ the computer replied.

‘Oh this does not look good,’ Jack said peering at the protocols displayed before him. ‘Looks like some sort of security infiltration virus...’

‘Oh this does not look good,’ the computer began intoning back at him. ‘Looks like some sort of security infiltration virus...’

The worst part of it, Jack reflected was that it was actually using his own voice to parrot his words back. He was about to say how irritating it could get then thought better of it.

His mind raced through various possibilities as he searched back through the system's records, damaged and frangible as they were it became clear that the virus had only been introduced a few days before. Which meant that someone on board the freighter had been intent on sabotage. Which meant that Benny and Ruth could be in serious trouble.

He looked up through the windows across the hull of the crashed freighter and corrected himself: more serious trouble; it looked faintly as if the vessel was moving. Not just bobbing in the water but actually tilting very slightly downwards towards the prow.

He pondered this for a minute. If it were sinking it was more likely to do it from the aft which appeared to have suffered more in the crash and was liable to be much heavier. Which tended to suggest that something was dragging the front down. The problem was that it was nearly a kilometre away and thereof difficult to see. He turned to the shuttle's external scanners and focussed and zoomed onto the distant bridge of the freighter.

He examined the image and saw something metallic and glinting break the waves and slam against the hull. It looked alarmingly like a claw.

'What the hell was that?' he said. Then instantly regretted it.

'What the hell was that?' the computer mimicked and this time Jack could have sworn he heard a mocking note in the voice.

*

Ruth dropped another chunk of the ship's infrastructure to the floor below and this time she heard a definite splash as it landed. 'That's not good,' she said.

Wolf either didn't hear or ignored her. He had nearly formed a gap big enough for them to crawl through, although it was going to be a tight squeeze for his chunky frame. Ruth hoped he didn't get stuck, as much for her own sake as his, and equally that the ship didn't suddenly lurch again trapping one or both of them.

The other problem was that, as the ship tilted further and further downwards back the way they had come their progress became ever more of a vertical challenge. Now they weren't just trying to get through the tangled mess of the damaged transom but they were having to do it uphill at the same time, and on a hill that was growing ever steeper.

'Got it,' Wolf said and she heard a clattering crash from the other side of the blockage as he pushed the remaining debris out on to the other side.

He pulled himself back out and looked down at her. 'You go first,' he said proffering her his hand.

'Why?' she asked.

'You're less likely to get stuck than I am,' he said.

Reluctantly she took his hand and allowed him to haul her the last few metres up the mound.

'Right, okay, fair enough,' she said as she started to wriggle her way into the alarmingly narrow

gap.

‘And I get to look at your arse,’ he said from behind her.

Ruth felt herself shudder. Perhaps he’d meant it as a joke but there was something alarmingly predatory about the way Wolf looked at her and right now she felt incredibly vulnerable. She hurried to pull herself through to the other side.

She arrived in a corridor which was, if anything, even darker than the one she had left and climbed down the stack of debris. At least on this side the slope was gentler and the tilting of the ship made the incline less steep. When she reached the bottom she looked up to see the top half of Wolf emerging. She was gripped by a sudden urge to run away from this strangely intense and disturbing man, but fought it. They were in this together and their chances together were much greater than their chances alone.

The ship lurched again and Wolf cried out in pain. Ruth actually saw the pile of twisted and broken metal and plastic move and there was a series of scraping and grinding noises and something which sounded alarmingly like bone crunching.

‘Are you okay?’ she shouted up.

‘I’m caught on something,’ he yelled back, his voice edged with pain.

‘I’m coming back up,’ she said and immediately started climbing.

‘No,’ he said, ‘I can get free and your weight could make it worse.’

Ruth froze then delicately lowered herself back down. She watched as Wolf braced himself against one of the girders and forced his body through the now badly distended gap. His face contorted and she could hear him swearing but slowly he inched his way out. He half climbed and half fell the rest of the way then lay at the bottom of the heap gasping.

Ruth could see the blood on his torn and tattered jerkin.

‘Anything broken?’ she asked. ‘How bad is it?’

‘I’m intact. Nasty lacerations and a lot of blood but it looks worse than it is.’

‘You okay to go on?’ she asked bending over him to examine the damage.

‘I’ll be fine,’ he said and she caught that look in his eye again. Without meaning to she recoiled. His expression softened and he placed his hand on her arm. ‘Thanks for caring.’

She stood up hastily. ‘Right. Well. Come on then,’ she said trying to cover her discomfort. ‘We should keep moving. How far down do you think we are?’

‘About half-way,’ he said as he pulled himself to his feet. His face twitched with pain but he said nothing.

‘I wish we could talk to the others,’ Ruth said as she peered into the murk ahead. From behind the noise of water sloshing seemed to have been joined by other sounds: wrenching metal, squeaks and squeals like frustration and triumph: the sounds of the creatures forcing their way into the ship and getting ever closer to them as the waters rose.

‘We can try,’ Wolf said and hunted along the wall for one of the inter-ship comms panels. ‘See if

these still work.'

He tapped the screen and it lit up feebly, random symbols gradually resolving into a sort of sense. 'Shipwide,' he said. The panel burbled softly. 'Try it,' he said nodding to the panel.

'What?'

'Speak here,' he said gesturing to the panel, 'It's set to shipwide, if there are any systems still working where they are, they'll hear it.'

'Right, half-got that. Okay,' Ruth leant forward and spoke into the panel, 'Hello Benny. Can you hear me? Wolf says... Oh... what's that?' she broke off listening.

'That's just your voice being broadcast all over the ship.'

'Ruth?' Benny's voice crackled out of the speaker, 'You okay? You're breaking up a bit. I don't know how much longer the comms system will hold up. Come to think of it I'm amazed it's working at all. Are you both all right?'

'Yeah, we're fine. Wolf got a bit bruised and battered climbing through a blockage but we're in one piece. How about yourselves?'

'We're managing. The main route was blocked so we've taken a detour, but we're okay. Look Ruth you take care yeah. We need to crack on, the water's rising.' Ruth thought there was an extra emphasis on the 'take care' but the distortion was so bad she couldn't be sure. Again she looked warily at Wolf and wondered if there wasn't something they weren't telling her about him. Then again, she reflected, she might be better off not knowing.

*

The hole in the hull was now completely submerged. Four of the crustaceans had now managed to force their way into the ship and were eagerly scraping and clawing at the walls, trying to haul themselves up faster than the slowly rising water. Outside their fellows joined in with their cries and continued ripping at the plating gouging an ever larger hole against which more and more of them tried to gain a purchase.

*

Benny waved her hand over the comms panel and it went dark.

'At least we know they're still alive,' she said.

'Hmmm,' Sylana replied without looking over. 'You were right though. We need to keep moving. Those things are getting closer.'

Benny examined the wall they had reached at the far end of the cargo bay. 'There should be an exit here back into the transom,' she said trying to make one out in the gloom. 'With any luck we're way past the live bit and we can carry on along there. I just can't seem to find it.'

She shone her torch upwards and saw why. The door had been blocked by a massive fretwork girder.

'We're going to have a devil of a job shifting that,' she said.

‘Best not to bother,’ Sylana said. ‘We can get into the next pod from here. Then try from there into the transom.’

‘You sure?’ Benny said looking dubiously around.

‘There’s emergency access between them all. Not much insulation in them but if you’re quick... Be more of a problem in space, but should be fine now.’

‘Never liked the word ‘should’.’ Benny said staring at the emergency hatch that Sylana had highlighted with her torch.

‘We don’t have much choice,’ Sylana pointed out. Benny glared at her, knowing she was right but still finding it difficult to reconcile the seemingly pleasant person she saw before her with the cold-blooded killer that lurked inside.

‘Right then, emergency hatch it is then,’ Benny said swinging her way up the wall to reach it. She thumbed the hatch control but with little hope of it working and was rather surprised when it hissed grudgingly open. ‘Result,’ she said avoiding the temptation to air-punch.

A blast of chill air hit her mingled with an astringent smell of chemicals.

‘Phew, doesn’t smell like this has ever been opened,’ she said as she hauled herself inside the short, dark connecting tube. The ship gave another of its periodic lurches and from a distance came the sound of rending and protesting metal. The ship vibrated alarmingly then fell back in the opposite direction as though something had snapped back.

‘Whooh,’ said Benny as she nearly pitched back into the cargo hold.

‘What do you think happened?’ Sylana said her voice sounding unnaturally loud in the echoing chamber.

‘I think something just broke.’ Benny said, ‘I think there’s probably now a very large hole in the side of this thing and I think that Doris and Ethel out there are likely to be celebrating cracking open a nice can of us.’

In the distance another alarm started blaring.

*

At the point at which the ship had split more of the creatures started to gather, searching for a way in. Every breach was hacked at with grasping metal claws as they thrashed and writhed in the water.

CHAPTER TWELVE

SECRET STASH

Adam Yarryl broke the surface of the water about fifty metres from where Benny was watching. He flicked the droplets from his hair. Water cascaded from his chest, running down his firm six pack to the top of his tight swimming trunks. He waded confidently out, back on to the beach.

‘I’m coming to get you,’ he shouted.

‘You’ll have to catch me,’ Benny called, and they ran along the shoreline joking, laughing, and goading each other. When Adam eventually caught up with her, they fell onto the sand, rolling over and over in the surf before coming to a stop and kissing passionately, the waves lapping at their feet. Then they walked hand in hand back to where they had left their clothes and towels by some rocks and lay down again and dried in the sun for a while. Eventually Benny spoke.

‘Adam, would you...’

‘Marry me?’ he completed.

‘... I was going to say rub some sun block on to my back, but hey.’

Adam leant over. ‘Yes is my answer.’

‘Marriage or lotion?’

‘Both.’

They kissed again. Benny turned over on to her front and he undid her bikini top. As he began massaging the cream into her back, she ‘Ooo’d’ with contentment and looked out at the glorious beach stretching away behind them and listened to the sound of the waves.

‘Bella, Bella Sol,’ she said in the cheesiest of Italian accents.

*

There was an electronic noise: the hum of a door opening. She heard footsteps entering and someone cleared their throat close to Benny’s ear. Sun, sea and sand disappeared as Benny reluctantly opened her eyes.

‘Why is it you always wake up just as you get to the good bits?’ she mumbled.

‘You have a visitor, Professor Summerfield,’ said the Venus-grade masseuse who’d been detensing her shoulders while she lay on the Total Comfort Couch.

Benny was in cubicle four, the pricey one, of the Sweet Dreams Suite. Delicate, low level coloured lights played over the darkened room to the sound of relaxing meditative chimes and ocean waves.

Apparently, though, the price didn’t guarantee privacy. She sat up, quickly slipping on the turquoise silk dressing gown from the stand beside her, as the Adonis-Grade attendant who’d just entered walked over, nodding his head in polite salute.

‘Please accept the sincere apologies of Bella Sol Pleasure Complex Limited for interrupting your session, madam, a statutory nought point five per cent will be deducted from your final bill for the

inconvenience, but I am tasked with delivering this highly confidential communication to you.’ He handed over an old fashioned wax-sealed envelope.

She stared at it for a moment. ‘Fightback. I’ve been dreading this.’

She opened and read it. ‘Tell them I’ll come now. Soon. An hour say.’ She stood and handed back the letter. ‘They’ve promised to show me things, tell me secrets.’ She looked into the attendant’s attentive but neutral face. There was a faint tremble in her voice. ‘What if I don’t like any of them?’

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

TOO TIGHT TO MENTION

‘What if I don’t like any of them?’ Sylana asked over her shoulder

‘It’s not a buffet, you don’t get to pick and choose. Our options are pretty limited at the moment. Get down. Now!’

Benny only just managed to yell the warning in time. As she had started opening the door to the next chamber something had felt wrong. The control system seemed to be working but had refused to release the door when she had tried it. There had been warning lights and a buzzer but she had chosen to ignore them and hit the over-ride.

It was only as the door started to move sluggishly aside that she began to realise why it had initially refused to open. The first drops of liquid that seeped through the gap rapidly became a torrent and she only had a moment to shout her warning to Sylana before the trickle became a torrent and a great deluge of slimy looking brown liquid poured past her.

She flung herself back against the wall of the narrow tunnel and clung grimly on as globs of the stuff sluiced past her. The smell was overpowering: a rank, sickly sweet stench which made her gag. She couldn’t see Sylana and could only hope that she had managed to get out of the way in time. The river seemed to flow for ages but eventually it subsided and Benny eased herself away from the wall and peered back into the previous chamber looking for Sylana.

She found her pressed up against the wall beside the emergency hatch staring at the sea of sticky brown goop which was now washing its way through the freight containers, coating them in a thick slime. ‘What was that?’ she asked fighting the urge to throw up.

‘Some of the cargo I’d guess. A concentrate of some sort. You probably drink that every day just diluted down. Whatever it was in must have ruptured.’

‘It smells disgusting. Whatever it is, I’m never drinking it again.’

‘Just be grateful it wasn’t hazardous. If that had been acid or cleaning concentrate...’

‘Well at least it wouldn’t have smelled so bad.’

Benny nodded. ‘Come on,’ she said, ‘we should be all right – it’s just a bit sticky and disgusting in there.’

They clambered through into the adjacent hold and tried their best to avoid getting too covered in the thick brown treacle.

‘You never finished telling me how you found out about this ship,’ Benny said.

‘No I didn’t did I,’ Sylana replied.

‘Well feel free,’ Benny said as she looked round the cargo bay. The lighting had failed completely in this one so it was only the play of their torch beams which gave them any clue as to what had once been held there. They could see large storage vats, many of which had broken from their moorings and crashed into each other – rupturing several and leaving a hideous mess of liquid and snack foods coating everything in sight.

‘It’s enough to put you off junk for life,’ Benny remarked.

‘The exit should be over here,’ Sylana said making her way towards the side wall.

‘So, you were about to tell me how you found out about this ship. If it was such a closely guarded secret how come you got hold of it?’

‘Why should it matter to you?’

‘You’re not the only one hearing stories about secret freighter shipments,’ Benny said. Sylana looked curiously at her but Benny ignored her.

‘This wasn’t just a holiday jaunt for you then was it?’ Sylana asked.

‘Possibly not.’

Sylana paused and looked as though she was about to answer, then she checked herself. ‘I just slept with the right people,’ was all she would say.

‘What and they just told you? Seems a tad unlikely. Why would they do that?’

‘They had their reasons,’ she replied.

‘Oh will you cut out the air of mystery thing. You’re really not very good at it. Why would anyone from the banks tell you about all this? It doesn’t make any sense. There have to be far better ways of embezzling their own funds.’

‘Who said anything about anyone from the banks?’ Sylana cut across her.

‘Who then?’ Benny said.

Sylana stopped and looked around. She stepped off to one side and tore at one of the labels on a nearby packing crate then handed it to Benny.

Benny stared for a moment at the label then her shoulders slumped very slightly.

‘You know that’s exactly what I did, and didn’t, want to find out.’

*

The creatures had crawled up the transom their torsos still submerged in the rising tide but their claws and tentacles scraping hungrily against the walls trying to gain a hold and haul themselves faster towards their prey. Ahead the sparking crackling glow of an electrical discharge arced across the gap between the walls. Oblivious the first creature surged into the field and was instantly killed as the power shorted out through it. For a moment it’s fellows shrank back probing nervously at the air. When nothing further happened they heaved themselves forward again but this time their jaws and claws caught around their fallen fellow and it was devoured in an orgy of shrieking and feasting.

Once it had been reduced to nothing more than bone and metal the survivors discarded it and moved onwards once again.

*

Jack was close to wanting to rip the computer system apart with his hands and throw it out of the ship piece by piece. After stamping on each piece first of course. Then probably jumping up and down on

them. Then maybe... He sighed.

Whatever had been insinuated into the freighter's systems was now well and truly embedded in the shuttle's as well. Trying to use the voice interface still only produced the annoying echo effect. Irritating enough when a child did it, somehow doubly so when it was a computer, so he had ignored it. He shot off a silent thank you to whoever had had the sense to install a traditional touch-screen interface as a back-up to voice control but even that only worked after a fashion and it was still hard going getting any sort of response from the system.

It was as though you were interrogating someone who had had all the neural connections in their head thrown up in the air and then randomly reconnected. Ask it the time and it would tell you the engine's core temperature, ask for that and you might get the co-ordinates of their last re-fuelling stop. The connections seemed to be stable but there was no way to determine what question would elicit what response. Or, more worryingly, which command would execute which action. Ordering a whisky from the galley systems was as likely to blow the emergency hatch as it was to turn the sonic shower on. Pretty much the only thing you could guarantee was that you wouldn't get a whisky.

He growled at the screen only to hear the same growl mocking him from the speaker a moment later, he opened his mouth to scream in frustration then thought better of it and instead took a deep breath and started patiently trying to map the computer's new connection grid to see if he could find a pattern. The more he mapped the more nightmarish the grid started to look. Realising that this approach wasn't going to work he stopped and looked up.

Night was falling and shadows were lengthening across the hull below him so it took him a while to realise what was wrong with what he was seeing: he was much much higher in the air than he had been before which meant that the freighter was sinking. He enlarged the image on the viewer and focussed on the prow of the hull which was now almost completely submerged. The water around it looked like it was boiling, so he magnified it further and only then saw the large metallic claws which were grasping and tearing at the superstructure as they slowly tried to drag the massive craft beneath the surface.

'Oh shit,' he exclaimed.

'Oh...' He turned the computer's speaker off before it could get any further.

*

Walking up the transom was now like climbing the side of a very steep hill. Ruth's calves ached and she was having to use what handholds she could find to keep herself upright.

Wolf seemed to have regained much of his strength but Ruth wasn't certain that she found that reassuring. His mood seemed to have grown darker and his responses even more taciturn since his injury.

'Shall we try the comms again?' she said sounding ludicrously over-cheerful even to herself.

'No point. Systems here are dead.' He waved his torch around indicating the dark and silent ship. Then he turned and stared at her. She felt her heart race and it took all her self control not to turn and run. It was without question the most disturbing stare she had ever seen. There was no warmth to it only a cold and leering hunger. He had the look of a big cat contemplating its lunch and deciding exactly how it was going to savour it.

‘How much farther?’ Ruth said quickly. ‘Do you think they’ve got there yet? We should probably hurry. Wouldn’t want them leaving without us.’ Her chattering descended into a nervous laugh which finally trailed away.

Then they both froze. From behind them came a roar of triumph and a sickening cacophony of squelching, clattering and screeching.

‘They’re in,’ Wolf said pointlessly shining his torch back down the passage.

‘What do you mean in?’

‘I mean inside the ship.’

‘With us?’ Ruth said.

Wolf just looked at her.

From behind them they heard the bellowing roars of the creatures. With mounting horror Ruth realised that where there had previously been two distinct voices there now appeared to be more. Each had a different pitch and she counted at least four of them.

‘Move,’ Wolf said shoving her ahead of him.

‘What about the blockage, that’ll slow them down,’ she said as she started hauling herself up the steepening incline.

‘Want to bet on that?’ he growled.

‘No,’ she said, ‘come to think of it I don’t.’

‘Then move.’

From behind the skittering of claws on metal grew louder.

*

As they reached the mountain of debris blocking the transom the swarm simply tore it apart, snapping their way through metals and plastics as though they were no tougher than paper. Great lumps of the structure clattered against their carapaces, bouncing off them then ringing and rattling as they ricocheted off the passageway and fell into the seething water below.

*

‘That’s it those Crustacean/Cephalopods are in here,’ Benny said listening to the triumphal cries of the creatures.

‘You know there’s got to be a better name for them, or at least a shorter one. Half squid, half lobster... squobster? lobid? squidster? Squidster. That works.’

Sylana shot her a disdainful look which Benny pointedly ignored before stuffing the label Sylana had thrust at her into her pocket – there would be time to think about it and its implications later. Now they had to get to the shuttle before the creatures got to them.

Sylana had been busy working the pump-action release on the door and they burst into the corridor together. Benny was sure she could feel the ship moving beneath her feet and even if it was

only in her imagination it still felt as though she was trying to make her way up a down escalator, each step requiring twice as much effort as normal. Worse than that it was a down escalator which ended in a sea of hungry giant metal-clawed squid-like creatures and she was sharing the journey with a sociopath. Why did her life always seem to end up like this?

‘The vault chamber,’ Sylana shouted from just ahead of her. ‘Come on.’

By now they were virtually climbing up the walls, pulling themselves hand over hand into the large bay where Benny and Ruth had first entered the freighter. Floors that had once been ceilings were now becoming walls and Benny found it increasingly difficult to orientate herself.

The rush of water behind her was growing louder and closer. She scrambled frantically on hoping that Ruth was ahead of the tide.

*

Ruth finally understood what clinging on for grim death meant, then fleetingly wished that another phrase had popped into her head. She looked back down the now steeply sloping tunnel. It was filling up with water fast and she thought she could pick out things moving around within it, in the near-dark it was hard to tell and in many ways she was grateful for that.

Progress now was a case of clambering up the girder-work from which the transom had been constructed. It was painful and cold and exhausting and her arms felt as though they were about to give out. The temperature in the ship had dropped dramatically in the last few minutes as the icy water rose inexorably behind and beneath them. She was tired and cold and her muscles were screaming at her and she was very very scared.

She swung out again grasping for another hand-hold and dragged herself another painful metre closer to the safety of the shuttle. It was only the image of that warm and dry cabin which allowed her to even think of going on.

It happened so fast she didn’t even register it: Her hand closed on what she thought was another piece of the piping which ran entwined through the girders. She gripped it firmly and started to pull herself up and a second later she was falling back away from the wall, the piece of pipe in her hand. The wrench tore her other hand free of its grip and she fell back with a brief cry. She hit the water on her back and the impact and the bitter cold knocked the rest of the breath out of her.

The panic hit her an instant later and without a moment’s thought she began to thrash about frantically. A part of her knew that this was the worst thing she could do but instinct over-rode all sense and she start screaming for help.

Wolf started to swing his way back to her. ‘Keep still,’ he yelled. ‘You’re making it worse.’

She ignored him, desperate to get out of the water which in her imagination was now heaving with mutant creatures summoned from her own worst nightmares. Something brushed against her and she screamed even louder.

Wolf was climbing down towards her. ‘Grab my arm,’ he shouted trying to cut through her terror. ‘Come on. Grab it.’ He leaned out as far as he could feeling his own pain tearing through him from his earlier wounds as he strained to reach her. She seemed oblivious to him, frantically batting away creatures which were real to her even if to no one else. ‘Ruth,’ he bellowed. Her head twitched

slightly. ‘Ruth,’ he yelled again.

Again there was a moment of recognition but then she took in a great mouthful of salty water and began to splutter and choke. Her thrashing was growing weaker as her head began to bob below the water. Then she reared up and screamed ‘Something’s got me.’

Wolf jumped down into the water gasping with surprise and shock at the bitter cold. He wrapped an arm around Ruth who blindly began trying to fight him off. He ignored her frantic scratching and clawing and grasped her firmly as he tried to drag her back towards the wall.

She was right, something had got hold of her. He felt the resistance as he tugged at her. He pulled harder hoping his grip was stronger than whatever had her leg, that in a trial of strength he would win out. By now her cries and movements were growing weaker so he gave up on patience and simply yanked hard at her – risking a sprain or even a break was almost certainly better than staying in the icy water a moment longer than they had to.

Fighting back tears of pain he grabbed a hand hold and pulled them both out of the foaming torrent. Somehow Ruth found it in herself to grasp onto the girder as he pushed her hands towards it. He climbed up beside her and held tight to her with one arm while he secured his own grip with the other.

They hung there for a few minutes while her breathing steadied. With a long shuddering sigh Ruth seemed to drift back to reality. She coughed and spluttered as she tried to clear the water from her lungs. Wolf held her tight in case she fell back but slowly he felt her muscles tensing as she began to take her own weight once more.

Ruth’s vision swam back into focus. The last few seconds felt like they had happened a hundred years ago. There was a weird unreality about it all as though she was remembering a long-forgotten experience. She looked up and saw Wolf staring down at her.

‘Thank you,’ she said feebly before being wracked by another fit of coughing.

‘It’s okay.’ was all he said, but his grip remained as tight as ever and when Ruth looked at him again she found one form of fear supplanting another.

‘It’s fine. I’ve got you now,’ he said and it felt like the icy water was crawling up her back again. Still too weak to move she just hung there limply, feeling his body pressed against hers and yet sensing no warmth from it just a slowly spreading dread.

Then the freighter lurched forwards and there was an ear-splitting rending crash from towards the prow.

Jack picked himself up off the floor and looked out of the windows. The ship had been torn in two. The front half had now vanished beneath roiling waves and only the back half remained afloat but in its damaged state it certainly wasn’t going to stay that way for long.

The breaking off of the prow had momentarily levelled the rest of the vessel but the respite was liable to be short lived. He scrambled back into the command chair and picked up the library pad he had been working from.

Regaining computer control had moved from urgent to vital, if he couldn’t disconnect from the freighter then he would be sinking right along with it. Having abandoned his attempts to work out if

there was any pattern or logic to the jumbled command pathways he'd opted to see if he could learn anything useful about the virus from the pad. Fortunately it was an entirely separate system so he had spent the last thirty minutes or so rattling through the vast database to see what, if anything, it had to say about his unwanted visitor and, more to the point, how to deal with it.

One of his experimental commands had reactivated the computer's voice control and now nothing he could do seemed to turn it off.

Unfortunately he couldn't quite get out of the habit of talking to himself under his breath and every time he did he wanted to kick himself when he heard the computer throwing his words back at him in a tone which he was certain was growing more mocking each time.

'Come on, come on,' he grumbled, trying to ignore the smug echo coming from the speakers all around him.

He scrolled rapidly through page after page of data, trying to narrow down to the specific strain that he currently had running riot throughout the shuttle's systems. Every minute or so he glanced up at the window aware of the fact that the ship to which he was currently tethered was slowly sinking and that sooner or later he would have to uncouple or risk going down with it and whilst he was sure the ship was watertight he was far less convinced about whether it would actually be able to function underwater. There probably hadn't been anything about that in the brochure he reflected wryly.

Absently his finger strayed across one of the control panels to his left. A loud alarm shattered the quiet of the cabin and the heads-up display flashed up 'emergency core ejection system – enter initiation code'. Frantically he stabbed at the console to cancel it. He looked at the control he had touched – the label read: 'command seat heating system', he shuddered, just turning on the lights might blow him sky high.

He returned his attention to the pad and noticed an icon flashing in the corner. He tapped on it and almost shouted with relief. Displayed before him was a complete list of symptoms which matched perfectly with what had been happening to the shuttle's controls. Vira, it was called. Eagerly he read through it and then hurried over to the main computer stack and, balancing the pad in one hand, began pulling panels apart to access the systems within.

*

'Benny. Benny.' The voice seemed impossibly distant, like someone was shouting to her down a very long metal tube. Whoever it was seemed to be calling for someone called Benny. For a moment Benny wondered who that might be. She knew the name was familiar but it wasn't connecting up properly. She decided to try to help. 'Benny,' she said feebly. 'Benny,' she tried more determinedly.

'What?' the voice said.

'Benny,' Benny repeated.

'No, you're Benny,' the voice said.

Benny opened her eyes and everything slammed into focus. 'Of course it is. Oh wow my head hurts,' she said moving gingerly on the wet floor and levering herself slowly up on to a bruised elbow.

Sylana was bending over her and still held Benny's head in her hands.

‘What the hell happened?’ Benny asked groggily sitting upright. ‘Where did all the water go?’

‘I think the ship has split in two,’ Sylana said pointing down the tunnel to where, in the distance, the glow of the planet’s twilight occupied the space where the front of the ship had once been.

‘Ahh right, explains it,’ Benny said. ‘Also means we have way less time than I hoped.’

‘I know,’ Sylana said, ‘I was just deciding whether to keep trying to wake you before going on.’

‘I’m amazed you waited as long as you did,’ Benny said as she stood, massaging her neck and trying to ignore the messages of pain which were pouring into her head from around her bruised and battered body.

‘You’re still my best bet for getting that vault open,’ Sylana said.

‘Oh for the love of...’ Benny almost yelled at her, ‘You can’t seriously expect to still try to open that?’

‘I can and I do,’ Sylana said, ‘and if you don’t help me then I’ll shatter your legs and leave you to be eaten by your Squidsters.’ The gun had reappeared in her hand without Benny noticing how it had got there.

‘Well I can hardly help you if you do that can I?’

‘Okay then I’ll have Wolf kill Ruth,’

‘Put like that...’ Benny said and marched off, although the effect was spoiled a little when she stumbled and crashed into a wall with a muffled curse.

The Squidsters’ frustrated howls echoed behind them.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

FILTHY RICH

The howling noises resolved themselves into shrieks and cries of laughter as another thumping dance track struck up and a siren started blaring. Peter looked around, wondering whether to break cover. A second siren joined it from the opposite direction followed by further shouting and mirth. Strobing lights played over the night sky. He pulled a device out of his pocket and checked time and location to ensure that he was where and when he was meant to be. Satisfied he hadn't made a mistake, but equally satisfied that there was no sign of his contact some two hours after their midnight rendezvous he drew his blaster and cautiously crawled out from the base of the hollow tree where he had been hiding.

It was frustrating not knowing what was going on, and it didn't help not being able to see what was happening on the other side of the estate's perimeter wall. Most of the noises could be accounted for, it was after all meant to be the biggest party of the season and it would be filled to bursting with every privileged rich hippie and champagne radical in the sector. But that didn't account for the wailing of the sirens and that was what worried him.

To his left stretched the forest. Dense undergrowth tangled its way between thick clumps of trees. He eyed it unenthusiastically but plunged in regardless. The going was, at best tough, at worst utterly impenetrable. The sultry heat of the day was long since passed and it was now cold and foggy.

He kept alert for any signs of guards on top of the walls. The last thing he needed was being chased by some rich boy's security patrol through thick and thorny undergrowth in such poor visibility.

He knew that moving was probably foolish, but he'd never been very good at waiting and had done a deal too much of it for her over too many years and he knew that if he allowed himself to think about it over much he would soon feel the old resentments bubbling to the surface. But it was difficult not to brood...

'Pssst.'

His head twitched round trying to identify the source of the sound.

'Oi. Lovely boy of mine.'

He peered through the dark into a nearby thicket to see Benny waving frantically at him.

He forced his way over to her. 'You're late and in the wrong place,' he said.

'Good to see you too,' she replied trying to wipe a thick cobweb from her face.

'Where have you been?' he asked glancing around.

'I got lost.' She shrugged.

'You had an EPS tracker. Why didn't you use it?'

'It wasn't working,' she said looking slightly shifty.

'How come?' he said. 'It was working fine before.'

'I think it developed a fault,' she replied. He raised his eyebrows and let the pause dangle

between them. ‘When I dropped it in a brook,’ she added trying to avoid his accusing gaze.

‘Terrific,’ he grumbled.

‘Look, the wall is about eight kilometres long so it took me a while to find the right place and it looks like I was slightly off in my calculations anyway and I’m sorry and these things happen and why do I always seem to be trying to justify myself to you, we’re here now aren’t we?’ she said, then paused for breath before adding, ‘Thank you for coming.’

‘Yeah, all right, don’t start getting emotional. What happens now? I mean why am I here? Valomor isn’t renowned for its crime rate. It’s dull. It’s damp. And it smells odd.’

‘It probably feels much the same about you and your nose.’ Benny quipped, then caught his daggers look and wished she hadn’t.

‘Why am I here, Professor Summerfield?’ he repeated.

‘Protection. Mummy’s not as young as she was. She’s recently had a rough time of it and she needs some extra energy and brawn. Just in case.’

That made sense, Peter thought. ‘So, what are we here for?’ he continued, ‘It’s not like I don’t have things to do.’

‘Involving that nice young man of yours perhaps?’

Peter scowled. ‘Drop it.’

‘Okay. Sorry. Can’t blame me for trying. Come on, I’ll show you. We’d better hurry,’ she said glancing at her flickering EPS unit. She started pushing her way through the thicket in the direction of the wall.

‘And put that gun away.’

Peter grumbled to himself but holstered his blaster.

*

The wall was ridiculously high and smooth. Peter couldn’t identify the material but he didn’t fancy his or anyone else’s chances of scaling it. Whatever it was it was as polished as glass although, he suspected, probably a good deal tougher.

Benny pointed upwards and Peter stared in the direction of her finger. Behind the wall he could still see lights flickering, they seemed to make everything dance and shimmer and allied with the swirling mist it was difficult to pick out much in the way of detail, but he thought he caught sight of something that glistened edging its way across the top of the wall. For a moment he thought it had vanished then he saw it again: It was about half a metre long, black, shiny, and fat, its undulating segmented body carried along on an uncountable mass of legs.

‘What in the thirteen galaxies is that?’ he hissed.

‘Hush,’ Benny whispered in his ear, ‘Who in the thirteen galaxies is that? you mean,’ she corrected, darting him a look. ‘They have excellent hearing so watch what you say, cough, gurgle, or hiss.’

‘You what?’ he said.

Benny rolled her eyes. ‘Just wait and see and try not to say anything unintentionally offensive. You have no idea of the depths of trouble the wrong sound could get us into in the next few minutes.’

The thing walked almost nonchalantly down the sheer wall and nimbly jumped the last metre to the forest floor.

Benny saw Peter open his mouth and decided to pre-empt the string of questions she knew was forming in his head.

‘What we have here is a ‘who’, not a ‘what’. A guest, not a guard. Don’t exactly know the species. A sort of cross between an earwig and centipede... so let’s go for... Wiggipede. I’m getting quite good at this species-naming lark. Now, on your knees.

His planned interrogation aborted he could only manage a slightly muffled, ‘Huh?’

She grabbed him by the shoulder and shoved him. ‘On your knees,’ she insisted.

As they both knelt, the Wiggipede came forward, reared up and opened its jaws. Peter drew his blaster, but Benny knocked his arm aside.

‘Put it away.’

‘You said I was here for protection.’

‘Not now. This is the okay bit. I think.’

The creature let out a series of hisses, coughs and chewing noises. Benny cocked her head to one side and furrowed her brow.

‘What’s the matter?’ Peter asked.

‘Shush, I’m concentrating,’ Benny hissed back through clenched teeth.

The gurgling and slurping noises continued. Peter sat itching to ask more questions but every time he looked as if he was about to speak Benny raised a warning finger.

The creature fell silent and Peter was about to seize his moment when, to his astonishment, Benny replied with a similar string of wet noises.

Unable to contain himself any longer Peter said, ‘That’s a language?’

Benny glared at him ‘Yes, it’s an archaic pigeon Martian dialect. It’s all we seemed to have in common. You know for a reasonably well-travelled person you can be remarkably...’ She groped for a word. ‘...parochial,’ she concluded.

‘Just took me a bit by surprise that you could speak it,’ he said.

‘Not very well,’ she admitted, ‘I think I just said thanks for the greeting and how much we appreciate the enormous prestige that’s about to be bestowed upon us. That or I just asked for a steak and kidney pie with a large spanner. It’s a subtle language, believe it or not. But whatever I say, I have to use the formal address ‘Your Highness’.

‘Your Highness?’ he said. ‘That’s a Highness?’

Benny abandoned subtlety and smacked him sharply across the back of the head. ‘Yes she is,’ she said, laying particular stress on the ‘she’. ‘And you’re lucky she doesn’t speak standard human.’

‘She doesn’t understand us?’ he asked, looking rather less nervous.

‘No,’ Benny reassured him. ‘At least I don’t think so.’ She paused. ‘Well I hope not. You really don’t want to annoy a Wiggipede. They’re friendly enough but carnivorous and non-too fussy about what they eat.’

‘Sorry,’ Peter said addressing the princess just in case.

More hissing followed between her and Benny and Peter watched, trying to work out if he could make any sense of what he was hearing or even detect some patterns in the noises the two were making. After a few minutes he gave up and returned his attention to their surroundings. Eventually boredom got the better of him.

‘What’s happening?’ he said.

Benny broke off her exchange with the princess. ‘It’s not only a subtle language. It’s also a very elaborate and rather long-winded one.’ She glanced at the wiggipede. ‘No offence,’ she added. ‘We were just exchanging ritual pleasantries.’

‘For ten minutes?’ Peter said trying not to let his voice rise too high.

‘Or we could just get eaten,’ said Benny.

‘Don’t let me interrupt,’ he replied.

Without any warning the princess was on the move.

‘This is it,’ said Benny, ‘prepare yourself.’

Within seconds, the Wiggipede was clambering up Benny’s leg.

‘Just as well dignity isn’t something I worry too much about,’ she muttered to herself as she felt the creature crawling slowly up her back and across her neck. It probably only had about two dozen pairs of legs but the sensation was of hundreds of tiny adhesive pads being stuck to and ripped off her in very rapid succession. Under other circumstances it might have been an interesting even enjoyable experience but on her knees in the damp forest it was decidedly unpleasant.

‘What’s she doing?’ Peter hissed as he watched the creature crawling over Benny’s head.

‘Bestowing her favour upon us,’ Benny said trying not to wince as she felt the sticky feet wandering across her forehead.

‘Say what?’ Peter said then nearly yelped when the creature sprang from Benny’s head and landed squarely on his. ‘What the hell...?’ he yelled as he started to raise a hand to try to brush it away.

‘Don’t do that,’ Benny said grabbing his arm. ‘This is the highest honour a princess of the Royal House can give anyone. It’s a mark of great esteem.’

‘It tickles,’ he said trying not to wriggle.

‘Yes it does. Now stay there like a good boy and accept the bestowing of an honour,’ Benny said, straining to hide her amusement as Peter’s eyes tried to track the creature as it wandered across his neck, down over his back and up around his shoulders.

After another few minutes of the guttural communication the princess started to make an alarming series of choking noises.

‘Is she about to barf?’ he whispered, all too aware of the fact that she was back on top of his head.

‘Stop whinging. This is what we’re here for.’

‘For her to vomit all over my hair?’

‘Quiet.’

The princess began to undulate in time with the noises and Peter tensed his shoulders ready to throw her off at the last minute irrespective of the diplomatic incident that might provoke. Getting covered in Wiggipede vomit was not something he was willing to suffer just to avoid causing offence.

At the last moment Benny reached out a hand and placed it below the princesses’ mouth. Into her waiting fingers plopped a small silver sphere. Perfectly smooth and, Peter noted, with no trace of mucus on it.

Benny bowed, fully aware that bowing on her haunches was a less than elegant action and popped the sphere into her pocket.

‘Can I ask...?’ Peter said.

‘That’s what we came here to get,’ Benny answered. ‘The Princess has risked life and limbs to retrieve what’s inside it for me from the office of this estate. There’s a big debutante party being thrown by the owner and she’s been in attendance. She’s been ever so brave. For the sake of her people.’

‘What is it?’ he asked.

‘Later,’ she said. ‘Her Highness needs to get back to the ball before she’s missed, and before she misses finding a potential husband.’

Benny extended her arm and the princess scuttled up it. Clambering carefully to her feet Benny reached towards the wall and the creature jumped lithely and clung onto the smooth surface where she hung for a moment before skittering back up to the top.

‘Well that was an encounter I’m not likely to forget in a hurry,’ Peter said looking up at the rapidly retreating figure. ‘Just as well she couldn’t understand us.’

‘Yes,’ Benny said, nodding, ‘definitely just as well.’

As the princess crested the wall Benny and Peter turned to leave, before wheeling abruptly back as the words ‘Good night’ floated down to them from the point at which the princess had just vanished. A wet giggling sound followed in their wake.

‘Oh dear,’ Peter said.

Benny rolled her eyes. ‘Come on, we have work to do.’ With that she turned from the wall and began moving as quietly as she was able through the undergrowth.

Peter pushed after her, trying to avoid the branches which whipped back as Benny pushed ahead. Every so often he would miss-time it and get slapped in the face for his pains.

‘So that was a princess huh?’ Peter said after a while. ‘Don’t suppose she’d turn into a beautiful young woman if you kissed her.’

‘I wouldn’t try it,’ Benny shot back at him, ‘their mandibles secrete a poison.’

‘Typical’ he muttered.

‘Why? Were you interested?’

‘I don’t think so.’

Benny stopped for a moment and looked at him.

‘Children.’ she said.

‘Sorry?’

‘Interesting gene pool if you two got together. Standard human, centipede, earwig, Kiloran.’ She thought for a moment then counted off the syllables on her fingers as she spoke: ‘STA.HU.PEDE.WIG.KILOR.’

‘A Stupid Wig Killer? Are you serious?’

‘Hmmm, maybe I should quit while I’m ahead on naming things.’

After a pause Peter said, ‘Am I allowed to ask what all this is about? And why you said not to say anything to Irving?’

‘I’ll tell you once we’re out of the woods,’ Benny said, moving off again.

‘Oh I see what you did there.’

‘I need you to stick around. You’re very much part of the plan.’

‘I am? Ouch!’ Peter yelped, as he failed to avoid another thorny branch. ‘I only hope it’s worth it.’

‘Oh believe me, this is going to bring the house down,’ Benny said her face set grim and a fire burning in her eyes.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

LIFE SAVINGS

Burning fire reflected in her eyes as Ruth entered the final chamber with Wolf next to her, his hand clamped firmly on her arm. He'd refused to let go of her since he had dragged her out of the water but there was little protective or reassuring about the way he was doing it.

She had stopped looking at his face, it disturbed her too much. The flashes of hunger she saw in him, the way he seemed to peer through her, into her. She struggled to describe the sensation. It was, she decided, like being consumed.

Around the chamber small fires had broken out, gas was seeping from pipes and electrical cabling was sparking and crackling. The place was even more of a wreck than the rest of the ship and to top it all the slow subsidence of the floor had resumed.

They were clearly sinking and this time faster than before and the rate was increasing.

Ruth looked around hoping to see Benny. In fact her gaze swept straight over her and Sylana such was the mess and confusion in the large room and it was only when Benny called her name that she registered the presence of the other two.

'Ruth,' Benny yelled, 'You're okay. Oh what a relief. Has he hurt you?'

'No,' Ruth shouted back her face splitting into a weak smile despite the situation. 'No, I'm fine. In fact he saved my life.'

'Seemed only fair,' Wolf rumbled, 'You saved mine.'

Ruth glanced at him in surprise. Had she been misreading the man. In the flicker of the flames and sparks his face seemed to be dancing, no longer sombre and sinister but alive and much warmer.

Why, Ruth thought to herself, can't you either be a nice guy or a villain? Why do you have to be all nuanced and complicated?

Wolf looked down at her. 'I'm not quite what you think am I?' He seemed to be reading her thoughts.

'No,' she replied, 'No, I guess you're not'

'Don't be fooled by him,' Sylana said as she and Benny arrived at her side. 'He is exactly what you think.'

'And what's that? Exactly,' said Wolf.

'A cold, twisted killer.'

'Tell the world why don't you.'

'Why not,' replied Sylana, enjoying the moment, 'you do. Online. You're 100 per cent sadistic misogynist aren't you?'

Ruth gasped.

'I'm not all consumed with violence and hate.' He looked at Ruth. 'I could love someone like you.'

Ruth said nothing but took a step back from him. All the fears, which had begun to evaporate, returned in full force. Benny put a protective arm around her.

‘You’re creeping her out, Wolf. I should stop now,’ warned Sylana.

‘Yes, I’ve killed,’ Wolf continued. ‘Couldn’t really help myself. But that’s my past.’ He hadn’t taken his eyes off Ruth. ‘I’m looking to the future.’

‘Well,’ Benny said loudly, ‘this is lovely. Little reunion. Nice catch-up. We could exchange stories. Or we might save it until we’re actually somewhere safe.’ She gestured towards the hatch on the far side where the shuttle was docked.

Sylana stepped in front of her. ‘We’ve got a few minutes,’ she said, ‘so let’s take a look at this door shall we?’

Benny almost laughed. ‘You’re obsessed,’ she said.

‘Tell me you’re not just the teensiest bit intrigued,’ the other insisted. ‘Just there, behind that door, the Nine Crowns.’

‘Of course I’m intrigued,’ Benny snapped back. ‘I’m also exhausted, soaked, bruised, and still covered in sticky gloop, and I don’t think Ruth and Wolf are any better off than we are. So let’s just get back to the shuttle and then one day maybe someone can come and retrieve this stuff with a proper expedition.’

‘I wasn’t inviting you,’ Sylana said, ‘After all it was you who found it.’

‘I thought you already knew where it was,’ Benny said.

‘We looked, believe me, we knew it was in this section of the ship, but no luck so decided to leave it until we got to the rendezvous. Lucky for us you stumbled into it. Shall we?’ she said, drawing her gun.

‘Really? The gun again? All right... Fine... Have it your own way. Let’s take a look.’

Wolf and Ruth watched the exchange then, just as Benny started to make her way to the vault door Wolf spoke up.

‘She’s right.’

The women all looked at him.

‘Erm, which one?’ Ruth asked.

Wolf stared at her as though she was almost incomparably stupid. ‘Benny,’ he said simply. ‘We need to get out of here. This isn’t worth dying for.’

As if to reinforce his point from alarmingly close came the squealing roar of the Squidsters.

‘They’ve found our scent,’ Ruth yelled.

‘Well it’s probably not our scent,’ Benny started then caught Ruth’s expression. ‘Wrong moment for pedantry.’

By now the entire deck had tilted to over 30° and the water was rushing in fast from both of the parallel transoms.

‘Let’s get to the ship and get out of here,’ Wolf shouted shoving Ruth towards the airlock.

‘I am not abandoning this,’ Sylana yelled at him, ‘There’s still time to get it open and grab as much as we can.’

‘Don’t be stupid,’ Wolf said trying to keep calm as he moved to stand in front of her. ‘It’s over, we’re alive, let’s get out while we still are.’

‘No,’ Sylana said icily.

‘This is crazy,’ Ruth interjected. ‘Those things will be in here in a minute, so if we don’t drown first we get eaten. Nothing’s worth that.’

‘Not even the Nine Crowns?’ Sylana taunted Benny.

‘Other than for giving the things that are going to eat us indigestion? No. Not much use to anyone if we’re lunch.’ Benny grabbed Ruth by the wrist and they started to haul themselves up the ever steeper gradient towards the shuttle hatch.

‘Sylana come on.’ Wolf tried one more time, then shrugged his shoulders and turned away from her.

‘Stop. Get back here.’ Sylana’s voice cut across the sounds of the ship in its death throes.

For a moment Benny didn’t realise to whom the order had been addressed. The bullet that slammed into the wall next to her stopped her dead in her tracks. She slowly turned back.

‘Until we have no other choice we work at getting that door open,’ Sylana said this time pointing the gun directly at Ruth’s head.

‘We don’t have time for this,’ Benny tried to reason with her, but the gun was unwavering.

‘Move,’ Sylana snapped, ‘Over to the vault and get working.’

‘What makes you think I’m going to be able to open it?’ Benny said but still she moved over to the all-too-solid looking door.

‘Because you didn’t come here by accident either and I bet it was for this.’

‘You are so wrong,’ Benny insisted.

‘Well either way, I’m giving you an added incentive,’ Sylana replied nodding towards Ruth. ‘If I don’t think you’re trying hard enough I’ll kill her.’

Wolf had stood watching the exchange, now he stepped back in front of Sylana. ‘What are you doing?’ he said, his voice calm and measured. ‘We’ve been damn lucky so far. Let’s not push it. I’m not going to let you do this.’

Sylana looked down registering with almost comical surprise that he had drawn his gun.

‘Put your gun down Sylana. You know I’ll use this if I have to. Remember who the real killer is here.’

‘Don’t you mean who’s the real survivor?’

He crashed backwards to the floor with the impact of the shot, a look of utter astonishment on his face. For a moment Ruth couldn’t work out what had happened then she saw the gaping wound in his

chest and the blood pumping out of his body. She looked at Sylana her mouth open in horror.

Sylana stared at her. 'Oh don't,' she said her voice utterly cold. 'He's killed a dozen or more in his time. It was just his turn.' She picked up Wolf's gun and moved back to cover Ruth.

'Keep working,' she said to Benny.

After a brief glance at Wolf's body Benny turned her attention back to the locking mechanism. The ship tilted again and Benny managed to wedge herself in next to the lock jamming her shoulder painfully into a joint between two girders and hoping that the next lurch wasn't violent enough to dislodge her.

'This is multi-encrypted,' she shouted over her shoulder, 'probably got some sort of identity verification system as well. There isn't a hope in hell of getting it open.'

'Oh there is you know. If you don't want me doing to her what I just did to him. Be inventive. You seem like a bright girl.'

Benny shook her head. 'You're completely cracked,' she said.

Sylana remained impassive, the gun rock steady.

'So how do you suggest I go about this?' Benny asked, 'Ask it very nicely to open?'

'Try this,' Sylana said, 'It should be able to interface directly with the locking systems. At least that's what the guy who sold it to me said.'

Benny took the proffered device and looked it over. The screen flickered into life as she touched it and it began trying to interface with any nearby systems it could find.

Realising she had little choice but to at least give the appearance of making an attempt at the door she let it do its work.

Whilst the door was undamaged it soon became clear that the locking system was in as poor a state as the rest of the freighter's electronics.

Without realising it she began to lose herself in the challenge. 'That's it,' she gently cajoled the data pad, 'come on. You can do this. System interlink... established. Oh you go girl. Now,' she paused and frowned, peering at the display, 'what's this then? Ah, I see, there's an over-ride but you need, oh...'

Her voice trailed away as she became more and more focussed on the problem.

Ruth watched Benny hunching over the pad. The ship lurched again and she grabbed hold of a nearby girder. Water was pouring in to the far end of the chamber. Then she realised that the water wasn't pouring into the chamber, the chamber itself was sinking.

She noticed that Sylana's attention now seemed to be wholly focussed on Benny. Slowly Ruth began to edge her way towards the other woman, she wasn't entirely clear about what she intended to do when she got there but she felt the need to do something.

Without even looking at her Sylana raised her gun again and pointed it straight at Ruth's head. 'Don't.'

Ruth froze and watched Benny, who seemed utterly oblivious to what was going on around her,

tapping busily away at the screen listening intently to the locking mechanism, stopping to stare momentarily at the wall then returning to the puzzle before her.

A movement from the water caught Ruth's attention. Something seemed to be writhing under the surface causing it to heave and bubble. She thought she glimpsed a gleam of metal moving around.

'Benny,' she yelled, 'Benny I think those things are in here with us.'

Benny started for a moment but she gave no other indication of having heard. Sylana too seemed oblivious.

'Benny, come on, we've got to get out of here.' Ruth's was frantic now. She looked at Sylana wondering how to get through to her.

'They're here,' she screamed.

Sylana turned slowly as if trying to work out where the voice had come from. She looked dazed as though she was trying to remember where she was.

'She's nearly there,' she said, her voice weirdly dreamy and distracted.

Ruth was about to bellow something else at her when a giant tentacled maw rose from the water and latched onto Sylana who shrieked in horror. She was lifted up and a metal claw snapped unerringly around her. Her body fell limp as the creature's head reared up and its great jaw opened wide.

'Benny,' Ruth screamed.

Benny's head shot up and she looked around, at the exact instant the locking mechanism disengaged and the door began to slide open.

The freighter, with one final crashing roar of protest upended and Benny only just managed to grab on to a stanchion in time. She gave the door an agonised look. The interior was almost impenetrably black. For an insane moment she considered trying to look inside, the lure of catching just a glimpse of the Nine Crowns almost overwhelming her.

'They're only worth a loaf of bread Benny, remember. A loaf of bread!' Ruth shouted.

Benny looked at her.

The Squidster reared up again, clearly not sated by its meal and a vast claw slammed hard against the wall next to Benny. She scrambled frantically up towards the hatch, now the only source of light in the drowning room. She glanced over to see Ruth doing the same. They arrived at the door almost simultaneously and Benny slammed her hand onto the emergency release.

The water was rising alarmingly rapidly and as it rose the creatures too drew ever closer, their claws thrashing about seemingly at random, but it only needed one lucky strike to send either of them tumbling back into the serried ranks of teeth which were all that Ruth could see. Off to one side she saw Wolf's body floating near to one of the creature's great eyes. It moved, slowly, tracking the position of the corpse then, almost delicately lifted a claw and picked the morsel up before dropping it surprisingly carefully into its mouth. Ruth felt an overwhelming wave of nausea rising in her.

She heard Benny slamming her hand repeatedly on the control and cursing loudly.

'Open up you damn stupid thing. We haven't come this far to... Come on. Open. Up. Now.'

Her increasingly frantic pounding didn't seem to produce any result. Ruth stared at her in despair. 'What do we do?' she yelled.

'Jack's inside,' Benny shouted back.

'Perhaps he can't hear us.'

'Well if he doesn't we're... Jack!' Benny almost laughed with joy as Jack's face popped up behind the portal in the door.

He waved at them then pointed downwards.

No sound came through but he was clearly shouting something about 'things'.

Benny almost exploded. 'Oh like we hadn't noticed. Thanks a bloody bunch. Yes we know.' She deliberately exaggerated her mouth movements without bothering to vocalise the words: '*Get this door open!*'

Jack ducked back down.

Ruth and Benny clung on desperately as the waters inched ever closer. Then with a whoosh of air and a slightly discordant grinding the hatch slid aside and they tumbled in.

'Now get it closed again,' Benny yelled as she lay on the floor suddenly the right way up in the ship's corrective gravity field.

Jack casually pressed a control and the door slid shut. They scrambled through the airlock and sealed the inner hatch.

For a moment they all just stood and sat staring at each other.

'Sorry,' Jack said, 'hatch was jammed.'

'No kidding,' Benny replied as she drew a ragged breath.

'Well you're okay now,' Jack said calmly as if this fixed everything.

'Not entirely – we are still attached to a ship which is about sixty seconds away from sinking so unless we wish to go with it...'

'Oh right yes,' Jack dashed back to the bridge and disengaged the docking systems. The ship lifted smoothly from the surface of the freighter's hull and then hovered above it.

Benny and Ruth followed him wearily onto the flight deck and slumped down into their seats. Together the three of them sat and watched as the freighter finally sank beneath the surface.

The only sound was the slow steady breathing of the two women. Jack stared out at the surface of the lake. It was now totally calm, scarcely a ripple disturbed its glassy veneer. He'd only caught glimpses of the things which lived there and he knew he could happily live the rest of his life without ever seeing them again.

'So what happened?' he said after a few minutes.

'Long story,' Benny replied.

'What about the crew?' he asked.

‘They were dead long before we ever got there,’ Benny explained.

‘So who was on board then?’

‘A bunch of thieves,’ Benny replied not particularly wanting the relieve the events of the last few hours until she had at least had time to rest and clean up and eat something. Not to mention downing a few much needed drinks.

‘Look I’ll tell you more later. I need to get cleaned up first. We should make our way back to Legion. What’s been happening to you?’

‘Nothing much,’ he replied casually glancing at the control systems, ‘I had some problems with a virus we caught from the freighter’s systems, which is one of the reasons the hatch wouldn’t open. But I think I’ve cleared most of it up, or at least disabled it.’

‘Oh good, right well, let’s set course back to Legion then,’ Benny said and lifted herself from her seat.

‘Computer, set course for Legion. Standard,’ she said as she turned to leave.

‘Computer, set course for Legion. Standard.’ her own voice came back at her from the speaker.

‘Erm... what was that?’ she said turning slowly back.

‘Ah,’ Jack said, ‘I only said I’d managed to disable most of it, that’s one of the bits I haven’t quite got to grips with yet.’

‘That could get very annoying very quickly,’ Benny replied.

‘Trust me, I know,’ he said, ‘I’m working on it, believe me.’

As Benny passed Ruth on her way to the cabin, she put her hand on her arm. A look passed between them.

‘Are you all right?’ Benny asked.

Ruth nodded slowly.

‘You opened that door and you nearly got yourself killed just to see if the crowns were there didn’t you?’

‘Yes,’ Benny said looking her straight in the eye, ‘Thanks for bringing me back to my senses.’

‘I wonder if they really were.’

‘Who knows,’ Benny replied. ‘Who’ll ever know. But you were right. A loaf of bread isn’t worth dying for.’

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

PUT YOUR MONEY WHERE YOUR MOUTH IS

It had been a meal to die for, Benny decided, though she hoped not literally. But given what she was about to do she couldn't have wished for a finer last supper. Rarely had she eaten so well or so much, although given the amount of alcohol she had put away it was probably just as well or she really would have been legless and she was beginning to regret her over-indulgence. She belched quietly, then remembered to put her hand to her mouth and mumble an apology.

Fortunately no one seemed to have noticed, or if they did they were too polite to say anything. It was, after all, a frightfully posh do. She was never comfortable at frightfully posh dos, and this was no exception. Without the aid of several glasses of the house red she would have been squirming with discomfort, as it was the only thing she was squirming for right now was the toilet.

She was back on board the Yarryl Corporation tour bus, fulfilling her promise to Adam. He had repeated his invitation to her to speak at his next corporate dinner several times: repeated, nagged and cajoled since, if truth be told, public speaking wasn't really Benny's thing and she really wanted to say no to him but, for some reason, couldn't. When she was close to him it was like she had to do everything he wanted of her. Everything and anything. Even now, sitting next to him at the top table in the ballroom, and after all that she had learned, she was fighting the urge to give up on what she'd come to do and just grab and whisk him off somewhere. She shook her head to try and focus and poured herself a glass of water.

At the moment they were in between courses. Some tables were still piled high with almost embarrassing quantities of leftovers. Benny whiled away the time looking round at her fellow guests, wondering how much collectively they were worth. In the flickering light from the plasma fires burning in grates and torches, which provided some much needed atmosphere, everyone looked warm and relaxed, chatting and laughing. If only she felt the same.

The puddings finally arrived. Servers weaved their way around the vast array of tables whisking away old dishes and delivering enticing new ones. Benny declined hers.

'Are you all right?' Adam asked, 'Not too nervous?'

'No, I'm fine, thanks,' Benny tapped her tummy, 'Just a bit full, that's all.' She puffed out her cheeks and comically feigned being sick. Adam nodded and patted her arm, then turned back to speak to the couple sitting the other side of him. Benny took a big swig of water before remembering she still could do with going to the loo and should avoid top-ups until she had done so. Using her free hand to conceal it she spat half back into the glass and wiped her mouth with a napkin, then went back to people watching.

When the staff eventually re-entered to clear up the sweet course, Benny saw her chance and whispered a quick 'Excuse me,' to Adam. As she made to get up, Adam stood too and tapped vigorously on his wine glass with a spoon, calling for quiet. Benny winced and sat down again.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' Adam addressed them, 'Can you hear me at the back?' There was a scattering of giggles and affirmations from the end of the ballroom.

'Good. Ladies and gentlemen. I'd just like to thank you all for coming to join me tonight in the partaking of this truly wonderful meal. Let's show our appreciation to the chefs in the usual way, shall

we?’ Benny joined in with the frenzy of clapping. Once it had died away, Adam continued.

‘So, while we await the arrival of coffee, cheese and, no doubt, a certain brand of delicious chips – ‘pause for another smattering of quiet laughter ‘ – I’d like to introduce our first speaker tonight who will update you on all our latest ventures. My very good friend, the product project leader of Yarryl’s Chips and managing co-director of the Adam Yarryl Charitable Foundation, Danielle Kerenson.’ The audience clapped enthusiastically as a grey haired, dark skinned woman in her early 50s, sitting several seats down from Benny, got to her feet.

Her speech wasn’t particularly long, but it rambled: waffling on about the spread of and the latest innovations in vegetable chips around the galaxy, business figures and projections, blah, blah, blah. Benny lost track at times as she concentrated on her own speech for later and keeping her legs tightly crossed. She did pay attention, however, when Kerenson got on to the subject of the work of the Foundation over the past year, describing a litany of digs, support for historic sites, research programmes, funding for museums, educational forums and services, grants, etcetera, as well as the money spent on other very worthy sounding causes. Kerenson wasn’t afraid of going over the top in her praise and you could easily come away with the impression that, were it not for the Foundation the entire fabric of civilisation was in danger of crumbling to dust. The list of good works and deeds riled Benny more and more as it went on, but the audience just lapped it up in what felt to her like an orgy of smug, self-satisfied, self-congratulation. Oh boy, she thought, just you wait until I get started.

Kerenson finished with a weak gag and sat to rapturous applause. Aware this was a second window of opportunity for relief, Benny slid back her chair and made to get up.

‘Sorry, Adam,’ she said in a hoarse whisper, ‘I’ve just got to go...’

‘You just can’t wait, can you?’ he cut in cheerfully, ‘Okay, you can do it now.’

‘Thanks for your permission,’ Benny replied, but Adam stood again as the applause faded away.

‘Ladies and gentlemen.’

Benny realised what he’d meant: ‘No, Adam, I didn’t mean... I need to...’ But it was too late.

‘I don’t think we can keep her hanging on for much longer,’ Adam said.

‘But it looks like I’m going to have to,’ Benny whispered to herself.

‘And her eagerness is an inspiration in itself. Though we only met very recently I’ve admired her...’ He stopped to smile warmly down at her and she couldn’t help returning it. ‘...and her work from afar for many years. I believe she could well be modern archaeology’s and, hopefully, our Foundation’s greatest asset, something proven to me early last week at the excavations being conducted on Tugara by the late Doctor Vassari.’ Adam paused. ‘Indeed we should take a minute to remember our highly respected colleague and the work he did for us.’

An uncomfortable shuffling silence ensued but well before the minute was up Adam continued. ‘Thank you. Without further ado, let me introduce our principal guest speaker tonight: Professor Bernice Summerfield.’

Adam gestured dramatically to his right as Benny reluctantly stood. As the applause started, an orchestral anthem blared out from concealed speakers and lights came up over a dais at the far end of the ballroom.

‘What’s all this?’ Benny asked.

‘I wanted you to have the chance to make an impact,’ Adam announced.

‘You shouldn’t have done that,’ she said, almost sadly.

‘Why not? It’s a big moment. For both of us. As I’ve said to you before, I don’t believe in half measures.’

‘No, honestly, you really shouldn’t have done that,’ she repeated.

Adam gave her a quizzical look, then grabbed at his stomach.

‘Is that your belly I can hear gurgling?’ she asked her face a picture of innocent concern as Adam felt the gripes a second time. ‘I think you’d better sit down while I get on with it.’

The applause was thunderous now. Moving more than a little uncomfortably she made her way to the speaker’s podium. Slowly the lights in the room dimmed. From her pocket she took a small sheaf of rough notes, carefully placed them on the lectern and looked up, gazing around the room. The music finished, the clapping finally died away. Even the clink of glasses and low susurrations of conversation had stopped. Time seemed to drag. Then Benny took a deep breath and began to speak.

‘Hello,’ she said hesitantly into the microphone, ‘I’m Professor Bernice Summerfield, as you’ve already been told by Mr Yarryl... Adam. I’m here tonight, at his request, for which I thank him, to perhaps... convey... give you an insight into... what it’s like to be... in this modern day and age... a practising... professional... archaeologist.’

Benny was painfully aware that she was seriously underwhelming her audience. She glanced over at Adam who was looking increasingly unwell then returned to her notes.

‘Adam asked me to start off this evening by explaining the importance of the preservation of our common past, what a truly worthy thing that is, much deserving of your support, and by way of demonstration, detail some of my so-called legendary archaeological discoveries and exploits.’

She looked up straight into the mouth of an obviously yawning guest as the yawn turned into a rather wet belch. She glanced round noting that one or two others weren’t looking too bonnie either. She took a deep breath and plunged on.

‘But before all that, I just wanted to talk to you for a little bit about Adam, really, and erm,’ she waved jazz hands, ‘good old brand Yarryl.’

She chuckled. “‘You know Adam, he’s one hell of a great guy.’” People tell me that all the time. Great guy, lovely guy. Everybody loves him, don’t they? When I first met him at the party here last week I thought, almost straight away, genuinely, without the beard, what a beautiful man... guy. And what a beautiful, super success story. Classic rags to riches tale. I’m sure you’ve all heard it. He’s told it often enough.’

A murmur of amusement. She looked back up the room. Even from this distance, lit only by the plasma fires, she could see Adam was sweating. He reached out for a drink.

‘Anyway, as I’ve said, a truly, great, great guy. And as Ms Kerenson has told us in her, um... exhaustive... informative speech, a great philanthropist. All that backing and sponsoring and giving and paying for things. No one can deny the work Adam’s done. What a great guy.’

‘Get on with it,’ someone said with feeling, someone else half-heartedly told them to ‘shush’. Adam was rocking slightly back and forth clutching at his stomach.

‘And he’s not only just a goodie two shoes, philanthropist, do-gooder, giver. Oh no, he’s a... a... bringer too. He brings crops to worlds where none have grown before, jobs for the unemployed, wealth and prosperity to old and newly established colonies, food to the poor and needy. Cheap food... cheap as chips, in fact.’

The audience groaned. Benny nodded at the forced laughter.

‘Have I told you what a great guy he is? Yes, of course I have.’

‘Where’s the coffee and biscuits?’ The audience were becoming openly restless. The couple next to Adam were leaning towards him making concerned noises, but he waved them away. Benny looked around the room; three or four others, including Danielle Kerenson, looked none too well and some were already up and leaving. Come on, come on, she whispered to herself all too aware that she was running out of rubbish to say.

‘What else is there... Business man! Yes, Let’s. Talk. Business. He’s slick. He’s clever. He’s on the ball. He’s canny at marketing and publicity. He’s profit making. He’s a safe bet, a good investment.’

As the coffee finally arrived, Adam started to rise from of his chair. This was it.

‘In fact, I know many of you here tonight are considering making major investments in Yarryl’s Corporation and Charitable Foundation. But there are some who would advise you that it might be safer to think twice before putting your money into vegetable chips, because, when the time comes to “cash those chips in”...’

She stopped talking because Adam was on his feet. She called out to him but he indicated to her to carry on as he made swiftly for the exit, still clutching his stomach.

In the eleven seconds it took him to reach the doors, Benny remembered:

The cherry in the blue and the frying rain.

Fights, chips and Liverestmass.

Irving’s ‘Will you do this for me?’

Fancy dress.

Tugara, Vassari and the Clock of Children.

The roar of the Widow Makers.

A night and morning with Adam.

Motel Hell and a slip of paper.

Meeting Fightback on Bella Sol.

Finding out that truth can still hurt.

The first proof: the secret treasure ship.

Sylana, Oxyrincus and the lost Crowns.

Getting Ruth and Jack back to Legion.

Fightback’s raid on Adam’s mansion on Valomor.

Peter in the forest and the brave princess.

And... now... this...

Eleven days in eleven seconds and Adam was gone. Benny leant on the lectern and went in for the kill.

‘When the time comes to “cash those chips in”... you’ll find them soaked in the blood of innocents.’

The room fell quiet.

‘Everything I’ve said about Adam is true, every word, but it is only the public face. The face you’ve been presented with for all these years. But as ever there’s a flip side. A dirty, filthy flip side of greed, power, theft, control and murder.’

She paused. Allowing what she had said to sink in.

‘Chips, philanthropy, posh balls and dinners, it’s all little more than a front. A front for a man who stops at nothing to get what he wants. Oh he’ll start off doing things legally but if that doesn’t work, and I’m not sure he tries that hard to make it, then he’ll double, triple, quadruple deal to get what he wants. He’ll remove any and every obstacle in his way, even if that meant entire populations being uprooted, or worse. Any protest or opposition is eliminated, eradicated. The rebellions that have risen up against him, the wars, and it doesn’t stop there. Rivals, employees, colleagues, even friends are removed when they come anywhere near to endangering his ever expanding empire. Because as it has grown his appetite has grown with it. The richer and more powerful he’s become the more he’s needed to sustain it. More and more money. It’s become an end in itself before which all is swept aside.’

She was leaning heavily on the lectern now, ignoring her notes, her eyes locked on her rapt audience.

‘But you can’t accumulate that sort of money from vegetable chips alone. Oh no. There’s plenty of other ways of making money. You can hide a lot inside or under a whopping great factory. Construct your plants on or near historic sites, indulge your passion for history and archaeology and you can set up a nice little sideline in art theft and smuggling. Get into bed with a crooked bank and you can hide it all on some out-of-the-way, secure storage planet on the boundary of known space, to be cashed in when you need it. Sound like a good idea? It did to Adam Yarryl.’

At the back of the room she could see figures milling around by the exit, doors opening and closing, whispered exchanges, seemingly lost without their leader to tell them what to do. But the rest of her audience still sat, silent and expectant.

Surprised that she hadn’t been stopped yet, or just shot Benny continued.

‘But where’s the beef, I hear you ask? Luckily there were enough survivors from the Yarryl Corporation’s trail of destruction to get together and organise themselves into a group called Fightback. And although Adam’s gone to great lengths to ensure their activities are kept as quiet as possible, buying off media and planting stories to discredit them, they’ve still fought on. Adam’s reach is long and he uses it, but he can’t stop everything. One of the things they’ve learned over many many years is that a control freak can’t help but keep records. It’s in their nature. And not only to keep them but to preserve them. However much they know that it’s potentially dangerous they just can’t quite bring themselves to destroy those files. The problem, of course, was finding them. Took quite

some doing I can tell you.’

A decision seemed to have been reached by the group at the doors. Several of them exited rapidly.

‘The only copies were, it turned out, on an exclusive, private estate and only the most select people were ever allowed to go there. But guess what? We got the plans. We got there. We got in and out. We got the proof.’

Benny reached into her pocket and took out a silver sphere.

‘All that was needed was a suitable platform to expose it from and thanks to Mr ‘No Half-Measures’ Yarryl, I’ve been gifted the perfect one.’

The crowd at the doors parted as Adam, in the middle of trying to belt up his trousers and still doubled over with stomach pain, was helped in by one of the people who’d gone out to find him.

‘Why didn’t you stop her?’ he shouted, ‘Why haven’t any of you gone up there and shut her up?’

Benny held the metal orb up and out towards the audience.

‘What’s she doing?’ He looked directly up at her. ‘Benny! Whatever you’re thinking of doing, don’t!’

Her angry gaze fixed on him.

‘Sorry, Adam. I know the truth, all of it: the lies, the fraud, the theft, the deaths. I can’t let you carry on.’

She felt bitter and betrayed and a teardrop on her cheek.

‘Adam Yarryl – this really is your life.’

So saying she flung the sphere high up into the air. It hung there, spinning, and began to expand like a balloon, becoming ever larger and more transparent as it went. Pictures formed on it spreading over the surface like rainbow colours on a giant soap bubble: Photos. Files. Accounts. Reports. Memos. Mail. Texts. Letters. A parade of damning proof.

As it hit the roof of the ballroom it burst into thousands of glittering filaments of data which twinkled for a moment in the flickering light before locating the nearest distribution node and insinuating themselves into every available info-stream they could find. Within seconds the information was being relayed out from the ship to every communications port in the quadrant.

The suppressed fear and panic in the room shattered with the sphere: Anger, guilt, disbelief, horror, long-held suspicions all being expressed at once. As the voices grew louder, Adam looked around realising that this was not something he could spin his way out of. He screamed over his shoulder; ‘Security. In here. Now!’ Eight burly, armed guards in padded combats and visored helmets marched in. They brandished their weapons and some of the guests dived for cover.

‘You three, get Professor Summerfield and lock her away somewhere. The rest secure this room and don’t let anyone out till I tell you you can clear it.’ The cramps and nausea hit him again. ‘I need the bathroom,’ he exclaimed and stumbled back outside.

The lights finally came back up and Benny saw the three troopers converging on her. As they grabbed her she put up no resistance. She saw herself reflected in the mirrored visor and realised that

she looked far more scared than she had imagined. She also saw her tears.

The squad frog marched her through the growing chaos, trying to avoid being buffeted around like human pinballs in the panic that was properly taking hold, now that guards were blocking the exit. She looked at the maelstrom which swirled around her surprised by how calm she felt. Things should be happening soon, she thought.

And they did. Everyone's pockets and handbags were beeping and warbling. Automatically people reached for their personal coms to find out they had received a new app.

*

Around the quadrant, in every home and workplace, on every space ship, at every public data booth, devices were beeping and a new icon was flashing demanding attention.

*

Gerrant Arnoir 'way-hayed' as she bounced over another Tugaran sand dune before turning and breaking sharply. Classic Heavy Metal music blared from her pocket and she pulled her vibrating cell out and looked at the little dancing man icon which had appeared on the screen. She noted with some surprise that he appeared to be holding a big bag of vegetable chips. Intrigued she tapped on it and started to read a letter addressed to an executive of the Five Systems Bank.

*

In Room 156 of a reasonably priced space motel somewhere between Tugara and Legion, newly-weds Hans and Marco Bliss hugged each other and leaned back against the viewing port glass, the glory of the universe behind them. Hans raised his com to head level and was about to take the umpteenth snap of the day when a brief burst of Mozart heralded the appearance of a silly, grinning git waving a bag of crisps. He opened the icon and their special day was spoilt forever by a recording of an execution.

*

In the courtyard of a palace deep within a secluded, tropical reservation on the human colonised planet her family had once owned a princess leapt off her many feet, did a victory roll in the air and landed, coughing and slurping in joy at the news report on the infovision. The damask wings of her betrothed flapped to cool her down as she hissed 'Gotcha!' at the screen.

*

Jack walked up to Irving behind the bar of the White Rabbit and handed him his brand new data pad. 'Irving, have you seen this? The Babblesphere's trending it like crazy.'

Irving read the rapid flow of Babs and clicked on a link to the dancing Yarryl icon. He opened up an accounts file and read it with increasing interest. He then scanned through some pics and texts.

'Can I have it back now, please?' Jack asked.

'Just one second.' Irving closed the link and opened up his favourite share price monitoring site and studied it intently.

‘Down, down and further down,’ he intoned quietly.

*

The room had grown oddly still as everyone stared at the data which was now flashing across their comms.

Only Benny and her guards were moving, still escorting her towards the doors.

A man a few metres away, dressed in a white tuxedo and black bow tie, looked up from what he was reading and threw down his phone. He drew a gun from inside his jacket and pointed it shakily at Kerenson. ‘You absolute piece of... How could you do that to me?’ He burned a hole in her right shoulder. She screamed as red flowed over red.

Then all hell broke loose. The five guards at the door tried to keep everyone at bay as another shot rang out. They failed and were pushed violently back through the exits. Benny’s guards let go of her and tried to help their comrades push the diners back into the ballroom. As the last of the screaming guests was forced inside the guard commander locked the doors. Benny grabbed his arm.

‘If you do that then even more people could be hurt. Or killed. You have to let them get out.’

He opened his visor to reveal Benny’s favourite hang-dog expression.

‘They’re not gonna hold for long anyway.’ The doors were already bulging under the pressure of bodies.

‘Peter!’ she hissed.

‘Okay. Okay. I’ll unlock the doors. You’d better run. Very fast.’ Peter reached out for the handle when Benny stopped him.

‘Wait. I can’t. I really, really need to spend a penny,’ she said with some embarrassment.

‘You what?’ Peter looked down to see her hopping daintily from foot to foot. He let out a low growl of frustration. ‘Right,’ He pointed at one of his men. ‘You go with her.’ He looked back at the groaning doors. ‘The rest stay with me. We’ll hold the doors as long as we can.’

Benny looked at the guard lumbering towards her. ‘I do know the way, actually.’

The trooper ordered to help stopped and saluted.

‘Would that be an Irish Coffee or a tot of rum, miss?’

‘I beg your pardon?’ She looked at Peter. ‘Hang on. Are these the reconditioned, fourth-hand Robo-drones that Crazy Hank tried flogging to Irving for cleaning the Rabbit? The ones that tried to put Toothless Bob in the waste disposal because he hadn’t moved for eight minutes? The ones that -’

Peter interrupted her flow with a sigh. ‘They’ve been re-programmed, Mum. Mostly. It’s only that one that’s giving me trouble.’

‘I sincerely hope so. I told you I’d need saving, not serving.’

Peter grabbed the drone, removed its helmet and fiddled around inside its head.

‘Look, while I sort this, go and do what you’ve got to do. And be quick.’

They were two corners along the corridor from the ballroom when the doors gave way and the near rioting mob exploded out.

Peter bundled Benny into the middle of the troop for extra safety.

‘What happened to the real security guards by the way?’ Benny asked, ‘They’re not dead, are they?’

‘No... well, only a few. Couldn’t be helped. Most are dealing with the effects of trying out your doctored options from the sweet course.’

‘Damn! Adam!’ Benny said, ‘We should have stopped to find Adam. We should bring him back with us.’

‘Too late now,’ Peter said sharply.

They ran on unhindered until they reached the docking bay, but before they could board the *Irverfield* the fastest of the gun-toting guests caught up with them and fanned out around the bay.

‘Stop!’ a young woman barked brandishing a evil-looking gun in her beautifully manicured hand.

As Peter shoved Benny into the ship, a motley selection of weapons discharged at them. Four of the Robo-drone troopers were destroyed, the other three managed to scramble aboard unscathed. Peter sealed the doors and jumped into the pilot’s seat.

Benny collapsed into one of the flight-deck chairs, her body aching and her breath ragged. She sat and watched the larger ship disappearing as they accelerated away from it and hoped that really was the end.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

KNIGHT'S FEE

Was this the end?

No. No it wasn't. She was still breathing and her head was aching. Benny lay on the cold hard floor trying, fuzzily, to work out what had happened.

Her breathing gradually grew less laboured although the ache stubbornly persisted. She tried opening one eye but that hurt too much so instead she just lay there and tried to think.

Okay, she said to herself, what's the last thing I remember? The problem with a question like that, she reflected, was that it presupposed that she could remember what the last thing she remembered was. She decided to try a different question: What could she remember of the last twenty four hours or so?

She and Peter had got back to Legion city after the debacle at the charity dinner. He had left her in one of the back rooms of the Rabbit while he went to work, or something. Exhaustion had finally got the better of her and she had fallen asleep. When she woke it was morning. She had got up, showered, put on the clean clothes someone had left for her, eaten a bit of breakfast Jack had rustled up. Ignored a call from Irving. Planned to go and see Ruth, but fell asleep again. Woke up and it was evening. Got up again. Set off to see Ruth... ah... now it came back to her.

Benny Summerfield, you know you shouldn't walk the streets of Legion alone.

She'd been stupid. Very very stupid. She should have taken the same precautions she impressed on others. Someone had grabbed her and thrust a drugged mask over her face and a hood over her. She had struggled and got a bang on the head for her efforts. The last thing she remembered was the unpleasant sensation of an emergency teleportation device tearing her molecules apart as she lost consciousness.

Head blow, drugs and teleportation. Her new least favourite combination. A teleport on emergency settings still worked but without any of the usual safeguards which cushioned your system from the trauma of the process. Throw in general anaesthetic and head injury and you're lucky to still be alive. This, she thought, must be how it feels for a sponge to be put through a blender.

The pain in her body had begun to be replaced by an oddly numb sensation which was even more disconcerting but this soon gave way to excruciating pins and needles. 'I didn't know when I was well off,' she said through parched lips, her voice barely more than a croak.

Having established what had happened she decided to risk a look around. Tentatively reopening one eye then the other she peered into the dimly lit, large, cold room in which she now found herself. No, not so much a room, more an empty space like the inside of a warehouse.

Apart from some faint illumination from lights spaced around the walls the place was shrouded in chilly gloom. The air was still and smelled faintly of cleaning chemicals and something else familiar although she couldn't quite pin down what it was.

It was eerily quiet.

Trying to ignore the pounding in her head Benny levered herself up on to her elbows and licked

her lips.

‘Hello Adam,’ she shouted. The effect was largely lost when her shout came out as little more than a dry rasp but she coughed and tried again. ‘Hello Adam. At least I assume it’s you out there somewhere.’ Her voice echoed back at her from the high ceiling. She paused again waiting to see if there was a response. Nothing. ‘I’m getting careless it seems, letting myself be whisked away like this.’

She coughed again, then noticed the bottle of water which had been placed on the floor near to her.

‘How thoughtful,’ she said opening it and taking a large swig. ‘I’m trusting it’s not drugged,’ she continued her voice much clearer now. ‘You didn’t have to use drugs you know. All you had to do was flutter your lashes and ask nicely and I might have accepted an invitation, you never know. Where am I?’

Another pause, more silence.

‘You’ve recovered from your tummy bug I hope? Sorry about that, but I had to get you out of the banquet in case you tried to stop me. The chefs were very obliging when I suggested adding something to the sweets. Mind you, they were from Fightback so it’s to be expected I suppose.’

Still nothing but her own echo. This was getting silly and very dull.

‘Oh come on. This is the bit where you gloat. Shine some bright lights on me and tell me how you’re going to get your revenge.’ She sighed theatrically. ‘Just get on with it will you.’

A ring of bright light snapped on and focussed onto the spot where she was sitting. Benny blinked and shielded her eyes. ‘That’s more like it,’ she said almost sounding relieved. ‘So where are you then?’

Another light came on, this time illuminating an area on the far wall at ground level. There was a low whirring noise and a section of wall split down the middle and slid apart. The illuminated interior of a room was revealed behind a window which ran almost the length of the wall. A figure stood silhouetted in front of the window behind what looked like the sort of podium from which Benny had addressed the charity dinner. He stood there for a moment then reached out and touched a control. A voice echoed round from speakers. ‘Yes Benny, it’s Adam.’

‘Well it wasn’t much of a guess was it?’ she said, ‘I mean which other powerful, rich, probably unhinged mogul have I upset lately?’

‘I imagine I’m only one in a long line,’ the voice replied.

‘You don’t know how right you are there,’ Benny muttered. She raised her voice again, ‘So I assume this is where I get my comeuppance.’

‘It seems only fair. After all you gave me mine,’ the voice said.

‘How and when did you get off your ship? If you don’t mind me asking.’

‘I felt obliged to decline my guests’ invitation to face a make-shift firing squad so I had to use my emergency teleport to escape from the toilets.’

Adam touched the podium again and an image of her delivering her speech appeared hanging in

mid-air opposite her. She watched as her ersatz self flung the data sphere in the air.

‘Nice bit of kit Fightback put together there, don’t you think?’ Benny commented. The pictures moved on to show news reports from various planets. The dancing Yarryl App icon made several appearances.

‘Great idea that, using your promotional cutout image. Very ‘apt’ I thought. My little Yarryl App. My little Yarryl Chap. App? Chap? Like that? I thought it was rather good.’

‘Why did you do this, Benny? I really thought we had something.’

Benny got to her feet and strolled unsteadily through the hologram and over to the window.

‘So did I,’ she said with feeling, ‘But it turns out that what I got to know was no more real than your cardboard cutout.’

‘In ten minutes you destroyed a lifetime’s work. The company has collapsed. Share price crashed overnight. Funds are being sequestered. Property seized. Everything I have worked to build pulled apart and taken away from me.’

Now she was up close she could hear his voice through the vents above the widow as well as over the speakers ranged around the room.

‘I don’t imagine for a moment that you are going to acknowledge that you deserved any of it,’ she said. ‘I imagine you feel suitably hard done by.’

‘Everything I ever did was for the good of the company. For the people who worked for me. For the lives that depended on me. Easing the economic and food crises of so many worlds. Ensuring the history of the universe is preserved...’

‘Oh come off it. I mean who the hell do you think you’re talking to?’ Benny cut across him. ‘Please don’t try claiming that you were performing some sort of public service. You did what you did for the greater good of Adam Yarryl. And you did way way more harm than good. You may have managed to kid yourself that there was some sort of underlying altruism, perhaps even that ends justified means but come off it. Seriously. You killed people. You destroyed anything and anyone which got in the way.’

‘I never killed...’

‘Oh for the love of...’ Benny took a deep breath, ‘Adam, stop it, just stop. No I’m sure you never killed anyone yourself. But if you press the button or give the order or sign the chit or whatever it is you did, you are just as responsible as the person who does the deed.’

She stopped, wondering whether goading him further was really in her best interests. She looked him up and down; the dark suited figure didn’t move a muscle. Her eyes lingered over his muscles. She felt herself blushing. Her head felt fuzzy. She could feel her pulse increasing. This was ridiculous, she thought.

‘Well it’s done now,’ he said after a long pause. ‘I’m bankrupt and wanted by a list of governments and agencies which is growing longer by the hour.’

Benny shook her head to clear it. ‘The wonders of modern communication. It’s what can happen, when the ‘chips’ are down.’

‘Who the hell are you to sit in judgement on me?’ he said. ‘You’re nothing. No one. I’ve been courted by some of the most powerful people in the quadrant. Had thousands upon thousands of people at my beck and call. Built an empire greater than any one planet has managed to sustain. Been lauded. Praised. Loved. I’m someone. Who the hell are you?’

‘Are you though? Loved or feared? Adored or just used? That’s what you’re afraid of aren’t you? That’s the big ‘chip’ on your shoulder. The fear that none of it is real. All that power and wealth and still no one really knows or understands poor little old you, and it keeps ‘chipping’ away at you doesn’t it?’

Adam turned his face to hers, his eyes sunk in shadow. ‘Very insightful. Very funny. Very witty Benny. You’re a very funny woman. I wonder how long you’ll retain that sense of humour.’

Adam moved around the podium and stood directly opposite her. He gazed at her with an expression of incomprehension.

‘I don’t understand people like you. Have you never wanted something so much in your life you’d stop at nothing to get it?’

‘Oh so many things. That lolly after I kicked up a fuss and refused to have my hair cut when I was five... passing my first archaeology exam... finding Peter... wanting to see the Nine Crowns...’ as she reeled off a list she kept her gaze focused on him and tried to work out what was going on in her head: What was it about him? The pull was as strong as ever. Why did she want to just break through the glass and touch him? Hold him, hug him. Without missing a beat she said: ‘Tell me you weren’t just using me, Adam? To add some more prestige, or gloss, or whatever to your ‘I am the guardian of all history’ propaganda? Tell me... just say it out loud. Please. There was love there? Wasn’t there?’

He stared back at her impassively. It was all too much. Benny lost it and pummelled at the window with the side of her fist.

‘Damn it, Adam! You’re a mass murderer and I dreamt about marrying you!’

She stopped momentarily blinded by tears, and gently placed her palms against the window. Gradually, Adam raised and placed his hand over hers with only the glass between them.

‘I thought you were the real deal,’ she said softly.

‘I trusted you and you let me down,’ he replied simply.

‘Please tell me what’s wrong with my head?’ she implored.

‘I hit it with the grip of my pistol.’

‘No, not that. Why I’m in love with you? My head, my heart, they’re breaking into pieces here because I’m in love with you, Adam Yarryl, and I don’t know why!’ she wailed then sank to the floor.

Adam laughed. ‘No, you’re not.’

‘What?’ Benny looked up at him.

‘You’re not really in love with me. It’s always helpful if I can get people on my side. To like me from the very beginning. I’ve been using specially formulated, pheromone-enhanced after shave and body splash for years.’

Benny sprang up and backed away, mouth open.

‘Some people are more susceptible than others, it would seem.’ Adam drove it home with glee.

Benny finally found the words to speak. ‘Are you telling me you spray yourself with... with... a love potion, and I got reeled in like some dopey guppy?’

‘Well, I wouldn’t have put it like that, but that’s the gist yes.’

Benny was rapidly shaking her head and exhaling through her nose, trying to clear both.

‘You complete and utter... I should have known there was something... pheromoney about you from the start.’ She wiped her eyes and then her nose on her sleeve. ‘Right. Well now that’s sorted and we know where we stand, let’s not waste any more of our time. You’ve got me here to kill me... Come to think of it you still haven’t told me where here is.’

‘This,’ he said waving an expansive arm around, ‘is my secret base, hideout, bolt hole, den, garden shed, if you like. A refuge from reality and sanctuary in case I ever ran into trouble. It’s a platform vessel I had built many many years ago, buried in an asteroid cluster orbiting a sun whose name needn’t concern you. I can hide out here for a very long time. It’s more or less self-sustaining. Gives me time to work out what to do next.’

‘How very forward thinking,’ Benny said, ‘And this is what? Your “intimidating people” room? Seems a trifle self-indulgent.’

‘This is the games room.’ Adam turned up the lights.

Benny squinted in the sudden brightness.

‘So, I’m in a sports facility, in space.’

‘I call it my Play Station.’ he announced grandly.

‘Why doesn’t that surprise me?’ said Benny to herself.

‘This is where I come for my recreation.’

‘What, on your own?’ Benny asked looking around the almost utterly featureless room. ‘Seems a little over-generous for solitaire.’

He laughed. ‘I prefer something a little more active. And something with an opponent.’

‘I see,’ Benny replied growing wary. ‘Well even so I’m not sure one-a-side football sounds like a great deal of fun either.’

‘Oh no, no, no. Here I get to indulge my two greatest passions,’ he said.

‘You have sex on a big bed of money?’

‘No. Not those. These.’

Adam cut the lights.

‘Ahh,’ Benny said slowly, ‘I’m not going to like this next bit am I?’

The walls of the Games Room showed a montage of images accompanied by an incredibly loud soundtrack of engines and explosions, weapons fire, shouting and screaming, all backed by orchestral and military music.

Benny covered her ears. ‘Can we have the sound down a bit?’

The volume decreased. Benny tried to pick out individual images from the maelstrom of war in black and white and colour, 2 and 3D. From Earth she saw footage of the trenches of World War 1, the Blitzkrieg of World War 2, Korea, Vietnam, Kosovo, Iraq, the great African, World War 3, and more she couldn’t even identify. But it wasn’t just Earth: the battle of Aggrin’s Spur, the massacre of the Shalkons, the siege of Belkeris Zeta, the planet Trilepterin’s 28 World Wars, the civil war on Tugara, and more. It was the ultimate military video nasty.

‘I prefer a good Ealing comedy,’ she said eventually. She gulped down more of the bottled water, wobbling slightly as she did.

Adam’s voice came over the speakers like a commentary: ‘History and warfare. Passions that have gripped me ever since my father bought me my first set of antique toy soldiers as a young child. I would play with them for hours and hours. I learned to appreciate the skills that were needed in centuries past. When you couldn’t just programme machines to unleash death. When it had to come down to the individual skills of the combatants. Where you had to train, and learn and practice and hone. Years of work, skills passed down through the generations. Then I graduated to online gaming.’

Benny raised a hand to stop him. This was all starting to sound increasingly unhinged.

‘Adam, I’m not really interested in the joys of your schoolboy Fantasy Combat League, or whatever you’re going to eulogise about next. You’re a war historian who likes to play soldiers. Okay. But I hope you’re not going to spout on about chivalry and honour and all the rest. It’s a nonsense. War is just brutal, cruel and vicious. People die, sometimes for a cause, good or bad, sometimes pointlessly and needlessly, but still they die. I’ll never fully understand the fascination some people have with the so-called glories of war.’

The films stopped and the lights came back on.

‘I can see that.’ Benny jumped as Adam’s voice rang out in the sudden quiet. She turned swiftly. He was standing a couple of metres away.

‘There’s a lot you don’t understand,’ he said quietly. ‘At the dinner you got it all wrong, you gave everyone the impression that I build factories that make chips – which sometimes cause wars – in order to make me money. Because money is my need and my greed. But that’s not quite how it is. You see I build factories that make chips which makes me money so that I can cause wars.’

Adam took a step closer as Benny’s eyes widened.

‘*I. Love. War.* Whether it’s between two living things or twenty billion. I love war. It’s my sport, my pleasure, my work, my life. Tugara is a good example of how I’m able to indulge my business and private interests, secretly fund both sides in a war of my own making and revel in the resulting fun.’

‘You are one sick puppy, aren’t you?’ Benny said.

He took another half step towards her.

‘I believe it’s known as War Addiction. But I’m not ill. I don’t want or need rehab.’

‘You know, I don’t mind the odd battle re-enactment, but what you’ve done is a billion-billion steps way too far.’

He took another step forward. Benny seized her chance and lashed out at him, but found herself bouncing off a force-field and staggered back as she fought and failed to keep her balance.

‘My apologies. Personal auto-defence barrier. I can position it wherever I like.’ Adam raised his left arm and indicated the watch-like device strapped to his wrist. ‘And I can control it and everything else from here.’

‘So what’s the plan for me then?’ she said, annoyed at having to get up off the floor yet again. ‘Napoleonic tiddly-winks? Great-war shove ha’penny? Doesn’t look like you’re equipped for much else.’

‘Benny, Benny, Benny,’ Adam’s tone now had a mean, sneering edge to it. ‘You really don’t have to keep covering your fear with all this humour. I suppose you think of it as humour at least. You’ve left me with nothing but what I have here, so you are going to help me pass some of the time by providing me with some... alternative amusement.’

‘And I forgot to bring my book of one hundred and one magic tricks.’ Benny said dryly, all too aware of the truth of what he was saying.

Adam continued, ignoring the interruption. ‘This is where I bring people to entertain me. People who have failed me, or obstructed me. If they can’t provide me with what I expected of them they can always provide me with some entertainment. So I bring them here to...’

‘To fight?’ Benny asked, deciding she had better take him seriously.

Adam nodded. ‘This room is superbly well-equipped.’

‘Really?’ Benny said looking around. ‘For what?’

‘Just step back a little and I’ll show you.’

Benny didn’t move.

‘It’s for your own safety, professor. Please step back. I don’t want to have to force you with the defence barrier, do I?’

Reluctantly, Benny moved.

‘A bit farther and to your left. Good.’

She watched as he operated controls on his wrist. There was a low thrumming sound and everything changed. The walls and floor of the chamber began to shimmer and glow. Each surface appeared to break down into ever smaller units, the units then moved around each other in a hazy blur.

As Benny watched, the chamber reformed into a wide stone arena. Everything about the room was transformed; The lighting altered to simulate bright sunshine. Along the walls the illusion of serried ranks of spectators appeared. Clouds filled an artificial sky. The floor around and beneath her became dust. Trap door-like holes appeared and the remains of two broken chariots rose up out of them. Despite herself Benny was impressed.

‘Earth gladiatorial arena. Roman. Modelled on one in northern Italy. Perfect in every re-created detail.’ The pride in his voice was all too obvious.

‘Well I have to say, wow, this is some serious technology. So what am I going to do, fight some lions?’

‘Not in this type of arena,’ Adam chided her, ‘wrong period and wrong type.’

‘Oh perish the thought that you might be historically inaccurate,’ Benny retorted.

Adam made further adjustments to the controls. The room transformed again. Benny kept trying to concentrate on the shifting surfaces but was never quite able to focus long enough on any part of it to work out how it was being done.

A few moments later she was standing in a dirt-floored pit. Steep wooden walls rose all around her. There were still spectators, even a low murmur of chatter and noise, but now they were dressed very differently. She peered around struggling to work out where she was meant to be this time.

‘Okay. You got me. What’s this one then?’ she asked.

‘A bear-baiting pit,’ Adam said.

‘Not exactly warfare, surely.’

‘It’s a blood sport. War between animals. I have broad tastes, but this would merely be a snack.’

She looked at him. ‘You really get off on all this don’t you?’

‘On all what? On the violence and the power and the control? Yes I do. Does that shock you? I know a lot of people don’t understand but I had hoped you might.’

‘Oh I think I understand. Not difficult to understand sadism.’

Adam raised his arm and adjusted controls again.

In moments the room had shrunk to become a boxing ring with Benny standing in the middle of it. She had to admit that the detail and reality of it all was immensely impressive. Moments later it expanded into a field. A long wooden fence sprang up out of the turf which had appeared beneath her feet only narrowly missing her. She realised why Adam had told her to stand where she did. Brightly coloured pavilion tents surrounded them and banners fluttered from poles.

‘Jousting?’ she asked looking back up at Adam. A thought then struck her. ‘This is what happened to Vassari, isn’t it? You teleported him here to ‘entertain’ you and then zapped his body back to Elanara. All in that morning after I left you.’

‘You got too close. You didn’t come when I called. I didn’t like it.’ Adam said as though this explained and excused everything.

‘And you had him cut to pieces for that? For jealousy?’ Benny gaped at him.

‘No, that was merely the tipping point. He died because his usefulness had ended when I thought I had you to replace him.’

‘You really are quite something else,’ she said in disgust. She looked around. ‘I assume we’re not going to spend all our time with you showing off your bag of tricks?’

‘Correct.’

‘So? What’s it to be then? How may I entertain you?’ Benny asked bowing low her voice dripping with sarcasm.

‘You know, since you liked Shima so much, maybe it would be fitting that you shared his fate.’

Adam raised his wrist controller again and made further adjustments. Once more the space transformed around them, this time becoming smaller and squarer, wooden fencing grew from the floor to form a square ‘champs clos’ and the tents dissolved from the sides and two new ones re-formed at the far ends. Even the weather had changed, it was now grey and over-cast. Curiously Benny could even feel a chill breeze blowing as the clouds scudded across the artificial sky.

‘This is one of my favourites,’ Adam said, moving outside the champs clos and turning back round to lean on the fence railing. ‘Earth. Foot combat. 15th century European. You will be suitably accoutred and provided with appropriate arms. It will be a fair contest.’

‘I should warn you I’m not half bad with a sword. How good are you?’ she asked challengingly.

‘You’re not going to be playing against me, you’re here to entertain me. This chamber is also equipped with the facility to create a variety of opponents for you to fight. At varying levels of skill.’

‘Oh really? An artificial opponent who presumably doesn’t tire, or die or even bleed.’

‘Oh it can be defeated, I’m sure, with the use of appropriate skill and enough stamina.’

‘Am I meant to be encouraged by that?’ she asked.

‘I’m in no hurry to kill you,’ Adam said smoothly. ‘I’m likely to be in... seclusion... for some time to come so I shall want to get the maximum possible mileage out of you.’

‘I’ll do my best to provide good value,’ she said looking grimly around.

‘I do hope so. Vassari barely even tried.’

‘He was probably terrified,’ Benny shot back.

‘Oh he was,’ Adam replied, ‘He just seemed to give up. Shame.’ He pointed to the end of the fence behind her. ‘Your squire will attend to you. In the blue pavilion.’

Benny looked over her shoulder and, shaking her head slowly, made her way over to the tent Adam had indicated. In other circumstances she would have stopped to admire the beautiful recreation of materials and gilded art upon it and the pennants as they fluttered in the artificial breeze but a combination of anger and fear blotted them all out.

‘Try not take too long,’ Adam shouted after her. ‘I don’t want to get bored.’

‘I thought you had all the time in the world,’ she said without looking round.

‘I do,’ he said with a quiet menace in his voice, ‘but not all the patience.’

*

As she entered the tent she was in time to witness the figure of a young man of about sixteen as he rose from a trap door, like a Victorian music box automaton. She stared at him for a moment, taking in his slightly bizarre appearance.

He was humanoid, and came up to the same height as her shoulder, but looked like an old-fashioned shop window mannequin with perfectly smooth skin and facial features which appeared as if they had been bought from a catalogue, the detail was all painted on with hair that seemed to have been sprayed on in a perfect facsimile of a hair cut of the period. He wore appropriate costume; black hat, burgundy doublet, white hose and leather shoes.

Thinking about it she realised he looked like a life-size antique toy, and after what she had heard from Adam about his prized soldiers, that made sense.

The young man bowed. She wondered for a moment if he would be able to speak.

‘My Lady, I am your squire,’ it said, the voice young but tinny and thin as though it was speaking through the cheapest speakers available using the most primitive voice synthesiser. ‘My name is Perkin and I will be of assistance to you.’

‘Well you’re going to be a charming and amusing companion, Perkin, I can tell,’ Benny said.

‘There’s no need to be rude, My Lady,’ the strange creature said, huffily.

Benny was slightly taken aback. ‘Sorry,’ she said. ‘You just didn’t look particularly sophisticated.’

‘You should never judge by appearances,’ he said. ‘Though small attention may have been lavished on my personal physical appurtenance only the finest skills have been employed in creating my control systems and personality.’

‘You know every time I think I’ve started to understand that man he does something like this,’ Benny said plonking herself down in a nearby wooden chair.

‘I understand your confusion, My Lady,’ the squire said, ‘The Lord Adam is a complex man.’

‘Lord? Oh no,’ Benny said, ‘I don’t think he’s complex, just contradictory. And bad.’

‘I choose not to make judgements. My lord is very good to me. I am rarely beaten.’ he replied.

‘Well, that’s nice to know.’

‘However my task here is to provide you with the necessary vestments and weaponry to tackle your opponent today, and my lord does not like to be kept waiting.’

‘Oh boo-hoo, well I’m in no hurry,’ she replied picking up a parchment that had fallen off the arm of the chair as she sat down. ‘What’s this?’ she asked.

‘It is a guide to the combat in which you are to engage My Lady,’

Benny read the title out: ‘How a Man Shall be Armed at his Ease When he Shall Fight on Foot.’ She looked up. ‘Pithy.’

She scanned down till she came to a list of things needed for the day.

‘One tent,’ she looked around and mimed ticking a box. ‘Check. A chair. I’m sitting on it, check. A basin?’ From somewhere Perkin produced one. ‘Check. Six loaves of bread – no butter or cheese? – two gallons of wine? Now we’re talking. Can we check that please?’

The squire looked at her, his plastic face forming into something that approximated a frown. ‘Though it is listed there and is a tradition of the period, my Lord Adam thought it most unwise given what you are about to face,’ he said. ‘I can furnish you with fortifying and isotonic beverages if you wish, My Lady?’

‘Bleurgh! No thanks, they always taste like I’m drinking dental mouthwash, I’d sooner stick with water. Anyway, who appointed him my mother?’

‘I am to provide you with everything you need to compete in the champs clos. Alcoholic refreshments would impair not aid. Although,’ it said in a slightly prissy tone, ‘it is surprising how many people request them.’

Benny thought for a moment. ‘Did you attend to the last occupant of this tent? Doctor Vassari?’

‘My Lady, I did so,’ Perkin replied.

‘Did the doctor request something more than a fortifying beverage?’

‘Yes, My Lady.’ he said, and Benny thought she detected a note of regret in the tinny voice.

‘How was he?’

‘My Lord Vassari was very frightened, he kept trying to bargain with my Lord but the Lord Adam is not one to make deals.’

‘Did he acquit himself well in the fight?’ Benny asked.

Perkin shifted uncomfortably.

‘Only adequately, My Lady. For the first twenty two and a half seconds, at least.’

Benny looked away and then back at the list.

‘A mess of meat flesh or fish. Check the fish, if you please. I’m not keen on any meat flesh making an appearance today.’ She began to skip down the list. ‘Blah, blah, blah... a glass with a drink made – see, don’t forget that wine – blah, blah, weapons, etcetera, blah, blah... and lastly a pennant to bear in my hand. Do I have a little flag on a pole, Perkin?’

‘Yes, My Lady.’

‘Then it looks like we’ve got it all.’

Perkin moved over to a big trestle table in the corner, on which lay a padded arming doublet, steel breast and backplates, arm and leg armour, gauntlets and a heavy, all head covering Close Helmet made of very thick metal plate.

‘Your harness is prepared My Lady.’ He gestured to a smaller table and indicated the poleaxe, sword and dagger which lay there. ‘And your armaments, which I have cleaned and sharpened.’

‘Cheers for that,’ said Benny with no noticeable enthusiasm.

‘I shall now arm you for combat, please stand.’

Benny stood and the squire picked up the padded doublet and began helping her into it. Other pieces followed until Benny was strapped and buckled tightly in. Perkin was about to place the helmet over her head when she stopped him.

‘No, Perkin, this is ridiculous.’

It wasn’t that the armour was heavy, it wasn’t. In fact it was surprisingly comfortable, the weight more evenly distributed than she had expected. It wasn’t even that it hindered manoeuvrability. It didn’t, especially when the wearer was fit and well trained from a very early age. The issue here was that she was neither of those. She had always maintained a good level of fitness, her vices notwithstanding, but with her age and the exertions of the past few weeks, let alone the last twenty-

four hours, she really wasn't up to scratch. Not only that but armour works best when made to fit, this was very much off the peg.

‘Look,’ Benny said, ‘this thing I’m going to be fighting, how good is it really?’

‘It depends on how the Lord Adam has ordered it to fight, My Lady. It is capable of all levels from novice to master. It will depend on how much value he wishes to obtain from the contest,’ the Squire replied, the Close Helmet still in his outstretched hands.

‘You mean on how long he wants to keep me alive?’ she mused as much to herself as to her artificial servant.

‘Indeed so My Lady,’ he replied.

‘Well then if I go out like this I’m not going to last thirty seconds. Even if he sets my opponent to its lowest settings chances are I’ll trip over and impale myself on my own polearm. I’ve handled a quarterstaff before, not well I admit, but certainly not a poleaxe and not wrapped up in a couple of old tin cans.’

Perkin winced. Benny had the sudden bizarre impression that she had offended his professional pride.

‘No offence,’ she added hastily. Making more enemies was probably best avoided. ‘Just that I think I’ll stand a far better chance unencumbered.’

‘But without protection My Lady could find herself in serious trouble,’ Perkin’s voice had risen a couple of semi-tones and he looked genuinely distressed.

‘Oh boy you don’t know how often I’ve heard that.’

Before Perkin could ask her to explain further she went on, ‘I’m sure this armour is the very best, a completely authentic reproduction and all the rest but all it’s going to do is slow me down. My only possible advantage over my opponent is being able to move faster and more easily than it can. Even then if I were you I wouldn’t go putting money on it. So if it’s all the same I think I’ll just stick with the minimum.’

So saying she started shucking off the bulk of the harness and, after a few more half-hearted protests Perkin came to assist her with the hard to reach buckles. Once she had been reduced to padded doublet, breastplate, left arm (or ‘vambrace’ as Perkin insisted she call it) and gauntlets she picked up the poleaxe. Balancing it she tried a few unwieldy strokes. She neither looked nor felt confident.

‘My Lady clearly needs some practice,’ Perkin said sounding for all the world as if Benny was merely having trouble putting on a fancy hat at a posh milliners.

‘My Lady,’ Benny said calmly, ‘strongly suspects that Mr Yarryl is not going to be inclined to afford her that luxury.’

‘I fear you may be right,’ he replied, his plastic face contorting into a rough approximation of regret.

‘Are there any other options?’ she said looking ruefully at the staff weapon. ‘Like a laser, or just a twelve-bore shotgun?’

‘My Lady is permitted to choose her arms from only this limited assortment,’ he twittered sounding now like a waiter in a tea room, ‘those items are not amongst the ones available according to the rules of this tournament. Perhaps if I were to demonstrate some of the techniques employed in poleaxe combat and offer some practical advice?’

Benny acquiesced graciously. Perkin put down the helmet and took the poleaxe from her. He minced across to the other end of the pavilion while Benny leant on the trestle table as she felt a wave of tiredness come over her.

Perkin was very good. He whirled and thrust and spun and stabbed, describing each move to her. For his finale he executed a highly intricate set of all those he had previously shown in combination before bringing the axe blade down on the trestle table with a resounding crack which split one of the planks and nearly took off Benny’s little finger.

‘Hey, watch my pinkie Perkin,’ she exclaimed, snatching her hand away.

‘Sincere apologies, My Lady. One was carried away.’ Perkin looked worried as he yanked the blade out from where it had become embedded in the wood, ‘It is forbidden to damage the fixtures and fittings. I will be punished.’

‘No, surely not when ‘Lord’ Adam can just magic more up with all this super-doooper technology.’ She took back the poleaxe, hefted its weight again and performed a couple of Perkin’s moves. ‘Anyway, after seeing you I reckon I could just get to grips with this and do a bit of damage. Hopefully without doing myself a mischief in the process.’

A fanfare of trumpets blared from somewhere outside the tent.

‘The summons, My Lady.’

Benny picked up the dagger and thrust it into her belt. ‘Suppose this might prove handy. If only for cleaning my nails.’

‘My Lady is somewhat flippant given the situation in which My Lady finds herself,’ Perkin noted.

‘My Lady is actually cacking herself but My Lady covers it up with humour as a defensive technique,’ Benny said.

‘My Lady would not be the first,’ the Squire replied a little sadly Benny thought.

‘You may be a fussy little twit but I think I could grow quite fond of you,’ she said as she adjusted her breastplate.

The Squire’s face dithered between pleasure and indignation.

‘Right,’ Benny said trying to sound more confident than she felt.

‘Is My Lady prepared?’

Perkin picked up the sword, moved to the entry and reached to open the tent flap.

‘Does My Lady have much in the way of choice?’ Benny asked.

‘Alas no. I at least shall be rooting for My Lady,’ the fussy little android said as he pulled the flap aside.

‘Thank you,’ Benny said, feeling both a rush of adrenalin and the churning of fear in her stomach.

‘Wish me luck?’ she asked.

‘I do most heartily, Lady Bernice.’

‘Well then, best get on.’ With which they stepped outside.

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Benny strode as confidently as she could muster from her tent and over to the square fighting area, carrying her poleaxe and pennant. Perkin followed then overtook her in order to remove a rail to let her through the fence. He took the pennant from her and planted it in the ground in the corner. She shivered as the chill breeze hit her. Whatever Adam was using to create these environments it worked impressively well. Nothing gave away that this was anything other than a real place with real people. At least not until you peered at Perkin’s face and realised that it was only a crude approximation. Adam cared about the things he cared about, the rest was irrelevant to him.

But the rest... The rest was astonishing, she had to admit that. Such a pity that it was being used for nothing more than the perverted entertainment of a power hungry sociopath. Still, she thought, nothing new there.

Adam was now sitting on the other side of the fence resplendent on what could only be described as a throne. He waved regally in acknowledgement of her return.

She gave a small mocking bow. ‘I see you’ve gone up in your world.’

‘All part of the fun. Why haven’t you put on your full armour?’

Benny had been thinking carefully about what to say. ‘I’m a bit of an old bird, not as fit as I was. I thought I’d make it quick for you.’

Adam was irritated. ‘You’re spoiling my sport, Professor.’

‘And you’re spoiling the rest of my life, Mr Yarryl, so can we get on with it please?’

He fiddled with his wrist control and another fanfare erupted from the unseen sound system. A moment later the tent at the other end of the field disgorged its occupants. First came a sword carrying squire, who could have been Perkin’s twin, it was the figure following him that made Benny’s jaw drop: At well over two metres, it towered over her, but then it would have towered over just about everyone she had ever met. ‘Well that’s hardly fair,’ she protested, ‘I’ll need to stand on a box just to hit that above the groin.’

Adam glanced at her. ‘Don’t exaggerate. This is a test of skill not size and strength. Although those can confer an advantage, but in this case I have allowed for that. At least initially. The contest will grow more difficult as he matches himself to whatever level of skill you demonstrate.’

‘Oh good, that’s nice,’ she said. ‘It’s very polished and shiny, isn’t it?’

‘He,’ Adam said, ‘is sporting the finest in German Gothic armour. An exact replica of the harness made for Archduke Sigismund by Lorenz Helmschmied of Austria around the Earth year 1480 CE. Adapted for foot combat, of course. The apogee of the armourer’s craft, don’t you think?’

‘It’s big and shiny which is really all I care about. And I prefer to think of it as an ‘it’ if it’s all the same to you. I’ll try not to dent ‘it’ too much.’

As Perkin had done before, the other squire let the Gothic knight into the combat square, replacing the rail behind him. Yarryl got off his throne and came to the barrier. He raised his arm.

‘Honourable knights. Commence the tournament... now.’ The arm dropped and, at the signal, the android moved swiftly into action. It crossed the space between them with alarming speed for its bulk. Benny danced nimbly out of the way only just avoiding a sweeping blow from its poleaxe.

‘Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee, I’m the gingerbread man, you can’t catch me,’ she blurted out and started dodging around the arena as fast as she could manage, diving to one side as her opponent swept its poleaxe at her once more.

Benny continued to dance back and forth trying to gauge its speed and agility. It moved surprisingly quickly but not as fast as she could, and although it was clearly far stronger and better protected, she could see that there were vulnerable areas where she might inflict damaging blows. Assuming that Adam didn’t decide to alter the parameters of the contest on a whim, and there was no guarantee of that, she reckoned she could last out for a while. At least long enough to try to formulate some sort of plan.

The problem, unfortunately, was that she hadn’t the first clue what that plan might be.

She realised that she had been standing still a fraction too long when the poleaxe swept down, just nicking the fabric of her padded shoulder and struck the ground only inches to her right. Darting away she ran past the metal-encased figure and saw her opportunity. She managed to wallop it just above and behind the right knee as she passed. It was an area only protected by lightly padded hose and the sharp edge of her axe blade ripped through it, connecting with the android’s metal leg with a clunk and when she turned back to look she could see the cut she had left in the plate. She saw the creature sway slightly as it compensated and was certain she could hear an electrical discharge.

‘Whoops, sorry,’ she said glancing up at Adam, who was now leaning on the railing and watching intently.

Was it her imagination or was the android now moving slightly awkwardly on its one leg? It swung round and came at her with frightening speed. No, she decided, as she leapt out of the way, it had just been wishful thinking.

For what felt like an age they sparred and skipped around each other. Benny landing the occasional, although she had to acknowledge, lucky blow against her opponent and, apart from the odd glancing swipe, managing to avoid all but the lightest of strikes in return. All the while she was working through possible escape plans and every time she came up against the same intractable problem. Namely the fact that she was trapped in this arena and Adam was outside pulling all the strings. Somehow she needed to get him inside with her.

At that instant she realised she had lost track of her crazily evasive dance and as she twisted around to locate the mechanical knight she lost her footing and stumbled. The android wasn’t slow to take advantage. Using the spiked bottom end of the poleaxe, it savagely swung it round to smash into the steel vambrace on Benny’s arm. The metal and padding beneath saved her bones from fracturing, but she was spun around by the force of the blow. Her opponent used the bottom spike again and thrust it into her breastplate with such force that Benny was sent reeling backwards, hitting the rails and tumbling over them. As she did so, she connected with an auto-defence barrier which had been set to stop her from escaping and she was catapulted back past the android, landing on her front in the

centre of the square.

But for the auto-defence she might not have had a head left on her shoulders, as the knight had swung the poleaxe over his own head to bring it down in a final death blow. Instead he had embedded it into the wooden rail and was now struggling to remove it.

Benny struggled painfully to her feet, noting the massive dent in her breastplate. The sound of the knight releasing his axe blade from the wood made her look up, just in time to raise her own poleaxe to parry another chopping blow. The force was so great that it shattered the wooden handle in two, the halves falling from her gauntleted hands. Splinters cut into her left cheek and ear as they flew by and, although her weapon had absorbed the shock of the android's attack, the flat of his blade caught her a glancing clout to the side of her head.

She staggered back, her ears ringing and threw herself out of range.

‘Hold!’

She turned her head to see Adam waving Perkin to go over to her.

‘Help her up and give her her sword and we will continue. I can’t tell you how much I’m enjoying this.’

She fought the pain as Perkin helped her to her feet again. He bowed and gave her the sword before retiring. Breathing heavily now, she removed her gauntlets and pulled off her arm protection to further reduce weight and encumbrance. Wiping the blood from her ear and cheek, she decided that she needed to devote less energy to strategising and more to simply staying alive.

In addition to her injuries she also understood that, unlike the knight, she was starting to tire. Her muscles were developing a dull ache which she knew would only grow in intensity and she could feel the fatigue beginning to work its way through her. If she didn’t come up with something soon then the end would only be a matter of time.

It was a given that she could never overcome her opponent by skill and swordplay, even if she had had the necessary skills in the first place chances were it could match and outclass her. So she was going to need something else. Something it could not anticipate: She needed a trick.

‘Are you rested?’ Adam called after a minute had passed.

‘Not really,’ Benny answered. ‘I could do...’ Adam waved a dismissive hand to re-start the fight.

Thinking furiously whilst still hurling herself around to avoid the android’s relentless attacks she began to form a hazy but workable plan, although in large part it depended on how good the thing’s strategic thinking was, or rather how devious minded its programmer had been and whether it had included heuristic or adaptive systems. Then there was also how well balanced it was physically to consider, how easily it could correct for sudden unexpected changes in terrain, what damage, if any, she may have already done to it...

Realising she was piling up a mound of unknowables Benny concluded that, as fatigue was really starting to take its toll it was now a case of doing it or waiting for the inevitable slip on her part.

So she took her chance; dashed past the knight and struck the hardest she could with her sword upwards under its forearm. It was a huge risk but it achieved the desired result. The poleaxe was flung up out of its hands, twisting in the air to land top spike down in the ground. The knight turned its

back to her with the clear intention of retrieving the weapon. As he did so Benny dashed around and hurled herself along the ground like a human bowling ball and simply knocked the machine's legs out from underneath it. It toppled over her like a felled tree. For an instant it looked like it was going to be able to right itself but Benny's gamble paid off. As she lay trapped beneath its lower legs she yelped as a flame erupted with a gun-like rapport from the damaged area at the back of its thigh and nearly singed her in the process. Then there was another further up, and another. Like a chain of firecrackers, tiny explosions travelled up the android knight's body till the very last blew its helmet off, exposing a doll-like painted face.

After a few seconds she let out a series of expletive laden grunts and struggled slowly out, pulling herself painfully from beneath its dead weight. Behind her she could hear Adam slow clapping.

'Well,' she said as she bent double, clutching her sides and trying to ease the pain which shot through her every time she breathed, 'I've just wrecked your prize robot. Happy now?'

'Superb, quite superb. You really are fantastic, you know. Better than any other woman I've ever known. A real fighter. I like that.'

'Terrific,' Benny said, 'I thought I'd at least have hacked you off.'

'Not at all,' he said still applauding, 'You can take five minutes and then I'll find you something else to do.'

As he turned away, Benny knew she had no strength left to survive another battle. Somehow she had to get Yarryl in there with her right now.

'Funny you mentioning other women. I met one of your past flings not that long ago. Sylana.'

He looked up only half interested, 'Who?'

Next to her the android fizzed and crackled. She looked at it wondering if it was reparable...

'Sylana Shakhar.'

She thought of Peter trying to fix the robo-drone...

'Pretty woman. A bit messed up. Like yourself. She was probably very eager to meet you.'

And a desperate idea formed...

'Yes, I remember her,' said Yarryl, 'We... met... once. It wasn't important.'

Benny began edging round the fallen knight...

'It was to her. She must have gone through your pockets when you were asleep or something, looking for information on the Five Systems Bank and their fleet of dodgy freighters. She wanted the routes so she could hijack one of them. Turned out to be the one I was looking for.'

She sat down, wincing, cross legged behind the thing's head and cradled it in her lap.

'So, we were on board this ship and, long story short, she didn't mention you by name, just tore one of your labels off a cargo container and waved it in my face. Turned out to be the final piece of the puzzle. So I could link it all together and, hey presto, send your little empire toppling.'

Pulling out her dagger and making as much noise as she could she began poking through the complex circuitry inside the burnt remains of the skull.

‘So there’s another woman you can thank for your troubles.’

‘What are you doing?’ Adam demanded.

‘Fixing it for you,’ Benny said, deliberately not looking up but focussing on the circuits in front of her, ‘Well, for me actually. I reckon that these things aren’t whistled up the same way the rest of this play pen from hell is. They must be independent entities. Which means they’re tied into your control circuitry. Which means that I can use it to access your control programs.’

‘Absurd,’ Adam said but Benny could hear the note of uncertainty in his voice. ‘You can’t possibly have those skills. It took some of the finest cybernetic engineers I could find to create these machines. You’re just an archaeologist.’

‘Willing to bet your life on that Ady-boy?’ Benny taunted him. ‘You should have realised by now that I’m very much more than just an archaeologist. I’ve been around you know. This isn’t the first machine like this I’ve come across, and it’s amazing what you pick up over the years.’

‘Nonsense,’ he retorted but this time with far less assurance.

‘Well okay then, I’ll just carry on shall I?’ Benny peered more closely into the head and hoped that Adam didn’t know any more about android brains than she did. Which was pretty much nothing.

It was a dangerous bluff she knew but without it there was no way she could think of to get Adam close enough to deal with him. She risked a glance in his direction, willing him to take the bait. He bit.

Deactivating the barrier with his wrist control, Adam leapt over the rail and bore down on her. Something seemed to have tripped inside him and Benny could see a cold murderous fury in his face. It was survival or nothing now. She raised the dagger to strike, but he roughly grabbed her and dragged her from the robot. In her weakened state he could easily hold her down, prising the dagger from her hand. He held it high, poised over her head. The game, his entertainment, had been abandoned in a moment and now his only interest seemed to be in destroying the woman who had brought him down so spectacularly.

Benny had no ready quips, no smart answers, no comeback. She realised that her final moments were actually going to be silent. She’d always hoped she’d manage some devastatingly witty put down when the moment came and she finally faced the end. Now it had come she had nothing but tears and pain. Adam also seemed to have gone beyond gloating. In his eyes she saw nothing but hatred.

‘For once in my life I’m going to finish the job myself,’ he said shaking with barely suppressed rage and seeming to relish the fear in Benny’s eyes. It was a mistake.

Mesmerised by the blade glinting before her Benny, for reasons she never fully understood, glanced momentarily at his other, empty hand. On his wrist she saw the remote control unit and, without even thinking what she was doing, lunged at it. With her thumb she pressed a control.

Everything around them began to shimmer, break down and rapidly reshape again, changing back into the jousting field. Before Adam had time to react, the long wooden partition that would keep the horses apart sprang up through the ground, hitting him in the backside and knocking him flying over Benny to fall face down across the lap of the knight. As Adam twisted on to his back, the fallen android stirred back into life with a hiss and a whirl. With frightening swiftness it sat up, snatched the dagger he was still holding in his hand and plunged it unerringly into Adam’s heart. There was

another sparking bang from the knight's open head and it froze in that position.

Benny lifted herself up on to her elbows and stared at the two bodies locked together in death.

She felt someone tap her on the shoulder and she looked round to find the android's squire menacingly pointing his sword at her. She sagged in exhausted disbelief.

'Oh no, not you too,' she said, 'that's just not fair. Look at me. Fight? I couldn't lift a glass of wine never mind a sword.'

'Would My Lady care to put that to the test?' She spun back at the sound of Perkin's tinny voice as he walked forward and offered her a tall pewter goblet of red wine.

'Oh you wonderful thing, you betcha sweet bottom she does,' Benny said taking and downing it in almost one go. Only then did it occur to her that there was still a little guy with a sword behind her. She looked back again to find the squire down on one knee, head bowed, offering the weapon to her in both hands.

'To the victor the spoils, My Lady,' it said without looking up.

'Sorry, I don't do chivalry,' Benny replied curtly and returned her attention to Perkin. 'What I could do with is some heavy duty painkillers.'

'I will attend to that of course, My Lady,' he said. 'What other instructions does My Lady have?'

'Why are you asking me? It's not like I'm in charge here now? Am I?'

'The Play Station is completely automated. There is no one else here to give instructions and the Lord Adam left none about what to do in the event of his demise,' Perkin said sounding almost cheerful.

'No one else on board?' Benny said. 'Wow, he really didn't trust anyone did he?'

'As you say, My Lady.'

'Look, before I start dishing out orders, I don't suppose you can show me the way out of here?'

'Out, My Lady?'

'Off the Play Station? Emergency teleport?'

'Teleport, My Lady?'

Benny heaved a deep sigh: Why was nothing ever easy?

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

CREDIT WHERE IT'S DUE

Why was nothing ever easy? Benny thought.

The crawler taking her from Legion city back home to the Silo Base on the planet's dark side had broken down. She'd fixed it, but from then on it had crawled painfully slowly and nothing she could do would make it go any faster. As a result she wasn't in the best frame of mind when she eventually arrived. Once inside, EOIN informed her that Irving was waiting in her quarters. She stood outside her door for several moments trying to gather her thoughts. She hadn't really stopped to rest, sort herself out or think since getting away from the Play Station.

She began to wonder just how to open the meeting. It wasn't like she and Irving hadn't had awkward conversations before. Except, of course, that those had been with another version of Irving Braxiatel. Whatever that was meant to mean. She sighed, she was in no fit state to try and wrap her head around that little mystery.

Finally, she walked in and found herself staring at the man's back. She wasn't sure what he was doing, but she was sure he was perfectly well aware of her presence.

She waited.

After a few seconds Irving turned and managed a creditable look of surprise.

'Ah, Bernice, I wasn't expecting you so soon. But your arrival is timely as Peter has been asking for you. I think he'd like you to accompany him on a trip somewhere. Something he's been investigating, apparently.'

Caught off guard she floundered. 'Oh, um... right. That's... that's really great. I'll talk to him as soon as I can. But I'm here to see you.' She suddenly felt dizzy and swayed a little. Irving's face registered instant concern and he hurried to help her to a seat.

'My dear, cuts and bruises? Are you all right?'

'Of course I'm not bloody all right. I've just spent the last thirteen days avoiding death by mad Sandrover-driver, fighter bombers, crashes, psycho criminals, drowning, mutant lobster squid, some very angry dinner guests and a false lover with his mechanical 'Sir Kill-a-lot' in a space cruising, Gym Hall of Death! How all right did you expect me to be exactly?'

'Forgive my insensitivity,' said Irving, 'Let me get you a drink.'

He poured her a very large brandy and she took it in both hands.

'In fact, let me offer you the services of my latest acquisition; a Mark 6 Kredysonuzzi Healing Bed. An hour beneath its revitalising rays will soon buck you up and sort out all that bruising and abrasion. Doesn't do broken bones or internal organs, though, I'm afraid.'

'Or broken hearts I imagine. It's okay. I'm fine... What am I saying? Get me under it now.'

She tried to stand but fell back in the chair.

'No,' Irving said kindly, 'I think it's best you sit there and recuperate for a while, first. Finish that drink.' He pulled up another chair and sat down opposite her.

‘We were all wondering where you had disappeared to,’ he said.

‘I was kidnapped by Adam Yarryl.’

‘Whatever for?’

‘He wanted to learn the secret of my famous lemon meringue,’ she said wearily. ‘He wanted to kill me, what else?’

‘Ah, I see. Hence your current appearance. He failed obviously.’

Benny took a long steady breath.

‘He’s dead,’ she said.

‘Ah, I see,’ Irving replied, before thinking it wiser to move the conversation on.

‘I have been hearing all about your recent adventures from Jack, Peter, and Ruth.’

Benny looked up. ‘How is she?’

‘Like you, much affected by her experience, but she’s keeping herself busy, and recovering. Slowly.’

‘Ruth and I could have been killed on that freighter,’ she said trying to keep her voice calm.

But enough was enough, she decided. Best not to shuffle around the issue. Irving’s talent for obfuscation meant that a straight question was just about her only hope of getting anything at all out of him. And that was a slim hope.

‘Just how much have I been manipulated through all of this?’

Irving raised a hand. ‘Manipulated? Even if I were manipulative Bernice, you cannot surely believe that I could have contrived your encounter with that freighter and the crash, or would have put you and Ruth in such danger merely on a suspicion or a whim. That was an accident. Nothing more. I believe it was your choice to investigate the stories of secret bankers’ treasure ships based upon information given directly to you.’

‘Yes, okay, fair point. But I’m not just talking about the freighter. You knew about Adam. You knew where his money really came from. You knew, or at least you suspected. Enough to get me to go along and meet him.’

‘I read the news, I watch the broadcasts, I hear the gossip. Perhaps I hear a little more than most. Or perhaps I just understand a little more. What else am I meant to have done?’

‘Done? It’s what you didn’t do.’ Now she was getting angry. It was amazing, she thought, how he managed to get right under her skin, seemingly without any real effort.

‘If you’d told me in the first place what was going on we might have been better prepared. We might have had an idea what we were going to face.’

‘And had I known then that is what I would have done,’ he said with even more infuriating calm, ‘Yes, there were stories about Yarryl’s business. Yes, I had my suspicions about certain aspects. But theft? Murder? Mass genocide? All those things you so rightly revealed to the world? I swear I had no knowledge of that. If that’s what you think, I’m disappointed.’

‘Which is about the best I’m going to get isn’t it? Disappointment.’ Benny found the strength to get up out of her chair and made to leave, but Irving moved to stand in her way.

‘Bernice. Please. Let’s not fall out over this. Again, I would stress to you that I am not the Irving Braxiatel of your past. I am your present and future friend and, hopefully, benefactor and business partner. In no way would I deliberately place you in a perilous situation. You are your own free spirit. You make your own decisions. You must believe me.’

‘Thousands wouldn’t.’

‘But a good friend would’. He took the empty glass from her hand. ‘My... our... involvement with Mr Yarryl was purely for our mutual, financial benefit.’

‘Money. All this comes down to bloody money.’ Benny was irate. ‘God, I wish... why do some people care so much about it? Why do people never understand? Having money doesn’t make you happy or miserable. Okay a certain amount makes life a lot less stressful but once you have that heaping more of it up makes no difference to how happy you are. Wouldn’t it just be so much easier... better... if we could all live without it. A creditless cosmos.’

Irving shook his head. ‘I think that’s a frontier none of us are ready or willing to cross don’t you think. It’s an old dream, and, I fear, an unrealistic one. We all have our aspirations, require our comforts, our desires fulfilled, to be on a par with everyone else.’

Benny sat back in her chair and folded her arms.

‘You can trust me, Benny.’

She looked around the room letting her eyes wander slowly over its furniture. Eventually she returned her gaze to the man who had just sat down again before her. She looked at him for a long time, his face a picture of innocence. And honesty. And truth.

She smiled.

‘I need to lie down on a Healing Bed, don’t I?’